



# VIRTUE OF NECESSITY

Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form  
in Chaucer's Poetry

Larry Sklute





VIRTUE OF  
NECESSITY

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,  
To maken vertu of necessitee,  
And take it weel that we may nat eschue,  
And namely that to us alle is due. . . .  
The contrarie of al this is wilfulnesse.

Chaucer's Knight's Theseus

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Larry Sklute

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## TO CAROL

An earlier version of a portion of chapter 3,  
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## I. "What May I Conclude?": Introduction



Geoffrey Chaucer left many of his poems unfinished. The *House of Fame* breaks off shortly before its end; the *Legend of Good Women* has two prologues and stops immediately before the narrator gives us the conclusion to the *Legend of Hypermnestra*. The *Canterbury Tales* is a work of fragments; within these fragments the tales by the Cook, the Squire, the Monk, and the Pilgrim Chaucer are incomplete. The incompleteness of these works becomes particularly interesting when we consider that Chaucer's completed narratives fascinate most by their inconclusiveness. The *Book of the Duchess* solves a problem different from the one its beginning raises; the *Parliament of Fowls* raises several questions about value but does not answer them. *Troilus and Criseyde*, on the other hand, insists on answers that I, with many other readers of medieval literature, feel the body of the work neither requests nor requires. And the *Canterbury Tales*, by its fragmentary structure, by its alternating points of view, and its way of entertaining debate without adjudicating, refuses to be conclusive.

Although readers frequently have noticed these characteristics of Chaucer's works, no one yet has tried to understand their relationship to the development of Chaucer's narrative forms. I propose to do just that. I shall explain the complex nature of Chaucer's inconclusiveness as it is revealed within and throughout the development of his poetry, suggest some historical reasons for it, and examine how it both creates and affects meaning in his work. I read each work as Chaucer's attempt to represent the complex and conflicting relationship between antinomies such as experience and authority, belief and proof, freedom and necessity, truth and opinion. I take the incomplete and inconclusive state of his poetry to indicate that he was not always satisfied with how well his inherited narrative forms embodied human experience. I see the shape of Chaucer's literary career as a search for an appropriate form able to accommodate the inconclusiveness that these antinomies

create. My goal is ultimately to explain how the inconclusiveness that prevails throughout Chaucer's literary career leads him to discover in the *Canterbury Tales* a kind of narrative unique for the Middle Ages, a form that provides an early model for modern fiction.

Before discussing the inconclusive nature of the forms of Chaucer's fiction, however, it is necessary to define both *inconclusive* and *form*, and to distinguish between incompleteness, the state of a text, and inconclusiveness, the nature of the meaning a form expresses. *Inconclusiveness* is a quality of not shutting together, of not bringing to a close or end, of not deciding, or determining, or coming to an agreement about something. It is an attribute of literary form as skepticism is a character of thought and ambivalence a trait of feeling. *Form* is a more complex term to define. I understand it to mean the intrinsic character of a literary work, its combination of qualities, its nature, or way of being. I take it to represent at once the writer's initial concept of the whole work and the design by which he arranges his content. I necessarily understand the design through my own perception of the content, its shape, and the effect of its shape on my feelings as the work proceeds. In an important essay on Chaucer, J. V. Cunningham has succinctly defined form in a way that reflects my understanding of the term and suits well my purpose in this study.

A literary form is not simply an external principle of classification of literary works . . . , nor is it an Idea. It is rather a principle operative in the production of works. It is a scheme of experience recognized in the tradition. It is, moreover, a scheme that directs the discovery of material and detail and that orders the disposition of the whole. If a literary form is an Idea, it is an idea that the writer and reader have of the form.<sup>1</sup>

A conclusive literary form satisfies an author's and an audience's expectations either by answering in some way the questions the content implies or by resolving comfortably the affective tensions the content creates.<sup>2</sup> An inconclusive literary form either fails to answer the questions the work raises or offers answers that do not sit comfortably with the reading experience. Although an incomplete work may indicate that a poet does not wish to be decisive, final, conclusive about meaning, it does not necessarily indicate inconclusiveness. A poet may leave his work unfinished for several reasons. he may lose interest in his

subject, his patronage may change or dry up, or he may die. There is nothing in the records of Chaucer's public life to tell us why he did not finish so many of his poems. But there is ample evidence in his poetry not only to suggest why he was inconclusive but to imply a relationship between the incompleteness of his texts and the inconclusiveness of his poetry.

Chaucer's narratives repeatedly express conflicting perceptions and beliefs that are left unresolved. His much-admired ironic technique<sup>3</sup> indicates one major way in which he controlled these conflicts, for an ironic technique postpones resolution of a problem by creating instead a kind of stasis between opposing possibilities that need not be resolved.<sup>4</sup> Irony clouds, rather than clears, the air. It indicates an attitude torn between at least two possible options. If it settles anything at all, an ironic technique settles the irresolvability of the options, implying that the poet feels ambivalent about the matter at hand. Ambivalence is to emotion what inconclusiveness is to form.<sup>5</sup>

In this study I shall examine Chaucer's narrative poems, which range in length from the very brief *Anelida and Arcite* to the enormous *Canterbury Tales*, itself comprising discreet and various narrative forms. I shall maintain that some of these forms are complete and conclusive, like the *Miller's Tale* or the *Second Nun's Tale*, and that some are complete and inconclusive, like the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. I shall also argue that some of Chaucer's narratives are incomplete and inconclusive, like the *House of Fame*, the *Canterbury Tales*, or for that matter, each fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*, and that some are incomplete but conclusive, like the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Monk's Tale*. Although I shall confront the incompleteness of some of these texts, I shall be chiefly concerned with the inconclusiveness of the form, since I believe that inconclusiveness characterizes more exactly than incompleteness the nature of Chaucer's forms and the nature of his mind.

The earliest narratives of Chaucer's career are dream visions whose concerns are quite different from each other yet whose forms are inconclusive for similar reasons. The *Book of the Duchess*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Parliament of Fowls* are similar in the way they avoid directing a reader's attention either to a clearly announced subject or to a developing theme. In this way they differ from the *Consolation of*

*Philosophy*, possibly the prototype for dream-vision form in the Middle Ages; also, they differ from the cosmological allegories of the twelfth-century "Chartrians," which direct their philosophical investigations toward an affirmation of an appropriately ordered hierarchy; they even differ from *Le Roman de la Rose*, which became the model for the French *dits amoureux* and in turn for these very dream visions. Chaucer's poems stick neither to one central problem nor to several related problems. Rather they are splayed. Their contents seem structured by a process of associations, neither reaching a main subject until the end nor subordinating less important elements to more important ones. John Manly observed some time ago that the *Book of the Duchess* follows "long and tortuous corridors"<sup>6</sup> before it arrives at its central intention—the confessional interchange between persona and Black Knight that epitomizes the dead Duchess as an ideal courtly lady. Similarly the *House of Fame* meanders through more than six hundred and fifty lines before the eagle mentions explicitly that the purpose of the experience is to bring the persona to the House of Fame. He does not arrive there, however, until five hundred lines later, and he never learns the tiding the eagle has announced as the purpose for the journey. Not until the very last episode of the *Parliament of Fowls*, moreover, does the persona encounter the altercation between the birds that is the poem's subject. Until these very late points, the purpose for each of the poems remains unknown. Along the way to the ultimate presentation of each subject, Chaucer incorporates so many related and unrelated issues that the apparent subjects of the poems constitute only one part of the meaning of each, and the organization of narrative units seems random and frequently mysterious.

Critics have praised the mysterious and undirected structure of Chaucer's early dream visions as convincing imitations of the dream work we all experience.<sup>7</sup> Anyone interested in understanding how a narrative form embodies meaning, however, encounters frustration as the possibility for conclusive meaning dissolves from scene to scene in these fluidly structured works. No sooner does the persona raise a problematic issue, such as the cause of insomnia, the value of literary representation, or the relation of love to the common weal, than he shifts to other issues without resolving the first. The elements of structure within each poem are so loosely coordinated, the narrative direc-



tion so unexplicit, that a reader rarely feels secure grounding in one or even in several related subjects and themes. By the end of the poem, if indeed the poem reaches an end, whatever conclusion the poet presents about the experience, if indeed he presents a conclusion, seems insufficient to all the issues the poem has handled.

The shifting structures of these poems would not in themselves be unsettling were the persona, "oure aller hoste," less discomfited by his experience. His confusion, ambivalence, and fear continually affect our understanding of the dream-vision conventions the poems express. His responses to his experience cause us to doubt the purpose of the experience and the function of the conventions—many of them familiar to Chaucer's audience from the *dits amoureux*. The persona's reticent and skeptical responses to most elements of his dreams and the poems' peculiar principles of structure create forms in which meaning becomes less than certain. In fact, once we become accustomed to the patterns of uncertainty in each of the poems, the elusiveness of meaning appears to be a part of their design, and we follow, more comfortably than at the beginning, the persona through his surprising and frequently worrisome journeys, fascinated both by his wonder and by his self-consciousness in relation to the elements of his experience.

The self-consciousness of Chaucer the persona is quite unusual, for, especially after the *Book of the Duchess*, it continually suggests Chaucer the poet's interest in the problem of meaning in poetry, in the kind of truth a poem can express, and in the relation of subjective experience to the expression of objective truth through poetry. Later, I shall confront directly Chaucer's interest in the relation of individual perception to the representation of truth in narrative form, and I shall discuss some ways in which this interest contributes to inconclusiveness. Now, I wish merely to suggest that Chaucer's ambivalent attraction to the problem leads him to construct dream visions that address themselves to traditional though various subjects but express a relatively unconventional attitude toward the nature of poetic truth and the function of poetry.<sup>8</sup> Inconclusiveness in the forms of the dream visions derives directly from the persona's ambivalent self-consciousness in response to the elements of subject and theme that the poems examine, express, and, when possible, resolve.

When Chaucer turns from the dream-vision form to write legendary

narratives in what is commonly thought of as his middle period, his mode of narrative changes but his narrator's concerns remain the same as the persona's were.<sup>9</sup> Because many of the poems of this period have been incorporated into the large form of the *Canterbury Tales*, where they exist as stories told by a character other than Chaucer, it is impossible to consider them as independent fictions exhibiting a direct relationship between Chaucer the narrator and his materials. A second level of fictionalizing has intervened, and any argument about conclusiveness or inconclusiveness in the forms of works like the *Knight's Tale* and the *Monk's Tale*, probably written during this period of Chaucer's career, must take into account the characters of the Knight and the Monk as tellers. However, the form of a narrative like *Troilus*, which Chaucer never attached to the *Canterbury Tales*, is also inconclusive, although inconclusiveness is not created by a peculiar structure, as it was in the dream visions. Indeed, the plot and structure of *Troilus* are clear. We are never confused about its direction or its themes. Rather, inconclusiveness in its form derives from the narrator's involvement with the materials of others, which he claims to be rendering for his own time. The narrator's frequently ambivalent responses to the content affects, and at times obscures, the meaning and conclusiveness that the narrative expresses. For example, the narrator repeatedly claims he has no power over the content, yet he controls the form and our responses to it by his ironic technique, by his decision to moralize certain elements of content as opposed to others, and by his rhetoric, which causes us to respond or not to respond, as he sees fit, to the content of his "auctor." Even in a fragment as brief as *Anelida and Arcite*, this control has the effect of undercutting whatever conclusiveness his received material possesses, for it interferes with the moral implications of the content.

Just as the forms of Chaucer's early dream visions appear inconclusive because the persona skeptically questions both meaning and value in many aspects of his experience, so the forms of the legendary narratives of the middle period appear inconclusive because the narrator continually qualifies authority, telling us what to think and what not to think about his characters and their actions. In fact, the narrator involves himself so dynamically with the content of *Troilus* that the relationship between narrator and narrative becomes as significant an

element of meaning in the poem's form as the love between Troilus and Criseyde, as Pandarus' relationship with the lovers, and as the history itself of the war at Troy. This involvement creates an inconclusiveness in the form that suggests Chaucer's continuing interest in how a narrator affects meaning in traditional literary materials, how he changes the truth value that resides in those materials. It also indicates that the problems with certainty apparent everywhere through the dream visions may not be attributed merely to inexperience in writing poetry, a charge that might otherwise be leveled against Chaucer's dream visions, his "juvenilia." It indicates a continuing quality of mind that leads him to impose the subjective perceptions of his narrator on literary meaning even when the narrative mode is not subjective.

The *Legend of Good Women* marks a new development in Chaucer's creation of narrative form and thus may be said to belong to another, later, period. By attaching a set of legendary narratives to a dream vision prologue, Chaucer creates in the *Legend of Good Women* a composite form that combines the two modes of narrative in which he had previously written. This new form exhibits even more strongly than the form of *Troilus* Chaucer's growing tendency to absorb legendary materials into the consciousness of a narrator, making the otherwise objective nature of the third-person legendary narratives appear to be a part of a subjective experience. Put in another way, the form of the *Legend of Good Women* allows Chaucer to establish a character in a dream-vision prologue who then projects a set of venerable narratives the purpose of which is not to render the legends authoritatively, as it was in *Anelida* and *Troilus*, but to sustain a fictive identity of repentant sinner that the god of love assigns to him. In consequence, meaning in the legends as they exist elsewhere becomes significant only insofar as it is appropriate to the teller of them. Having created this new form, Chaucer frees himself from the problem of authority, which seems to have concerned him from the beginning of his career, and from the problem of what truth poetry can demonstrate. He has also discovered, as I shall later argue more fully, that a poet can create narratives that need not claim to represent truth and whose values need not be his own.

It is precisely this discovery that enabled Chaucer to create the *Canterbury Tales*, his most complex and extensive experiment in narrative form. The *Canterbury Tales* is a composite form like the *Legend*

of *Good Women*, and it is encyclopedic like the *Decameron* or the *Confessio Amantis*, to name but two of the many sets of stories, often framed by a fictive action, that the Middle Ages enjoyed. Yet the presence in the *Canterbury Tales* of many characters who tell tales makes it a more complex form than the *Legend of Good Women*; moreover, the high level of integration between the characters of the pilgrims and the nature of the tales they tell—even of the genres in which they tell their stories—makes it a more mimetic form than the *Decameron*, and less concerned with a univocal didacticism than the *Confessio Amantis*. Using lessons learned from his earlier works about the limits of poetry to express truth, Chaucer creates in the *Canterbury Tales* characters whose individual psychologies and motives influence, even determine, the nature of meaning in poetry. Chaucer uses many voices, personalities, or consciousnesses to describe individual and at times contradictory opinions about the world and its values. No one opinion represents the truth of any matter, yet each is, generally speaking, valid in light of what we know about the respondent. As a whole, the *Canterbury Tales* is not only a set of stories but a cornucopia of opinions, of convictions, of attitudes, whose form suggests a sense of pluralistic reality.

Unlike Chaucer's earlier works, whose forms are not necessarily inconclusive by intention, the *Canterbury Tales* is a purposely inconclusive form from which it is impossible to ascertain a univocal truth, for knowledge is embedded in opinion and opinion is presented through fiction, at times through hearsay, as opposed to dream or historical work. But the uncertainty that this kind of inconclusive form offers represents in the *Canterbury Tales* a strength not a weakness, a virtue not a fault. In later chapters I shall argue that inconclusiveness was potential in the original conception of the *Canterbury Tales*, that Chaucer found it useful for expressing a sense of a pluralistic reality in which certainty was no longer a problem for the form, though it remained an issue in the content, that it led to the creation of a work whose effect strikes us as uniquely modern. Here, however, I want to suggest that the form of the *Canterbury Tales* moves in the direction of more extreme inconclusiveness as Chaucer develops it. The introduction of the Canon and the Canon's Yeoman into the *Canterbury Tales* offers a clear indication that Chaucer was experimenting with his

already inconclusive form by making it yet more inconclusive. Let us look specifically at what changes in the form the introduction of these characters causes.

In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer tells us that there were thirty pilgrims, twenty-six of whom he describes, "preestes three," a nun, and himself.<sup>10</sup> Harry Bailly originally stipulates that each pilgrim will tell two tales going and two coming. The complete *Canterbury Tales*, then, will comprise one hundred and twenty stories (or more if the count of pilgrims were to come to thirty-one) that a pilgrimage frame will enclose and effect.<sup>11</sup> It will be a large but not unprecedented encyclopedic work, the complex lines of whose structure the first fragment begins to work out. After fragment one breaks off, however, we can no longer be certain of the order or the structure of the remainder of the *Canterbury Tales*, although the appearance of Chaucer's retraction at the end of the *Parson's Tale* makes certain that fragment ten will be the last. Despite the incomplete state of the *Canterbury Tales*, then, and despite a changed intention expressed in fragment ten that the parson should end the tale-telling as the pilgrim's approach Canterbury at the end of the day, Chaucer must at one time have conceived of the form of the *Canterbury Tales* as closed and "completable." But when the Canon and his Yeoman ride up to the pilgrims in fragment seven, composed late in the order of the fragments, Chaucer is substantially altering the form of the *Canterbury Tales*, for he is opening a form that had been closed until that point. Although this is the only place in the *Canterbury Tales* where Chaucer intrudes characters from outside the fictive realm he has established in the *General Prologue*, it is significant, for the intrusion changes our ultimate expectations of the shape and "completability" of the work. Theoretically, Chaucer can now continue to expand his form indefinitely, despite its clearly intended completion point. He can insert new characters who could plausibly join the pilgrimage anywhere along the route from Southwerk to Canterbury even as he decides not to use original characters like the Knight's Yeoman, the Guildsmen, or the Plowman.

It might, of course, be argued that Chaucer ultimately would have placed the Canon's Yeoman among the original pilgrims, an argument like the one already advanced about the Manciple.<sup>12</sup> But such an argument would have to speculate that Chaucer would have canceled

the stunning dramatic interplay between the Canon, his Yeoman, and Harry Bailly, a speculation I find distasteful in light of the excellence of the material. Moreover, appearing where it does after the *Second Nun's Tale*, having essentially the same message about belief and the nature of belief, although different in form and style from the Nun's tale, the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* would lose much of its powerful driving force if the Yeoman had been present to hear the legend of Saint Cecilia.<sup>13</sup> It is equally likely that Chaucer incorporated his earlier tale of Saint Cecilia into the form of the *Canterbury Tales* because he recognized the possibility of its effect before the Canon's Yeoman, describing his situation, warns us in his tale *not* to "multiplie" and *not* to seek the meaning of the philosopher's stone.<sup>14</sup> The presence of fragment seven indicates that at the height of his constructional powers, Chaucer conceived a way to open a form that had been closed until then. It suggests, further, that Chaucer preferred ultimately to work with an open literary form and that whatever motivated him to create inconclusive narrative forms earlier in his career continued to motivate him late in his career.<sup>15</sup>

I have no doubt that some will greet my argument about inconclusiveness and narrative form in Chaucer's poetry as unhistorical since I have been using the term *form* as we think of it, not as Chaucer thought of it, and since conclusiveness is a problem of particular relevance to our time. Yet the fragmentary nature of much poetry of the late Middle Ages, the formal and self-conscious interest in discovering what poetry can tell about reality in the works, say, of Martianus Capella and Alanus de Insulis, and the often painful confusion of meaning in the versions of *Piers Plowman* that Chaucer's contemporary left us, convince me that this modern problem, *mutatis mutandis*, was also relevant to Chaucer and that it is not historically inaccurate to view Chaucer's career as a series of experiments in narrative form, as I have defined the term, culminating in the creation of a form like the *Canterbury Tales* that offers a sense of pluralistic meaning comfortably in place of a sense of certainty. The historical likelihood of this conviction can be demonstrated by examining some shifting patterns of thought in the late Middle Ages and their epistemological consequences.

## II

Until the twelfth century, Saint Augustine's Neoplatonic premises, epistemology, and method of reasoning prevailed throughout Christian Europe with little challenge. Like all Platonic philosophy, Augustinianism locates the Real ultimately in the Ideal Mind, *Nous*, God, the divine principle. Reasoning begins with the notion of a first cause outside human consciousness, from which there are traceable effects such as the world and the individual within it.

During the twelfth century, however, a developing interest in the individual consciousness produced an alternative epistemology that offered a changed direction of reasoning.<sup>16</sup> Some writers grew interested in reasoning not only from God to man, as the Augustinians had been doing, but also from man and his effects to God. For instance, as a first step in understanding the universe outside himself, and ultimately of understanding God, Richard of Saint Victor began by looking inward:

Frusta cordis oculus erigit ad videndum Deum, qui nondum idoneus est ad videndum seipsum. Prius discat homo cognoscere invisibilia sua, quam praesumat posse apprehendere invisibilia divina. Prius est ut cognoscere invisibilia spiritus tui, quam possis esse idoneus ad cognoscendum invisibilia Dei. Alioquin si non potes cognoscere te, qua fronte praesumis apprehendere ea quae sunt suprate?<sup>17</sup>

[In vain man raises his heart's eye to see God, if he is not yet fit to see himself. First let man come to know the invisible things of himself before he presume to grasp divine invisibilia. You must first understand your own spirit before you can be fit to understand the invisible things of God. In general, if you are not able to understand yourself, how can you presume to grasp those things which are above you?]

Richard was neither alone in this procedure nor the first. Eadmer, the biographer of Saint Anselm, tells us that the ontological proof for the existence of God that Anselm proposed occurred because Anselm began with the individual mind, his own, at the center of thought and excluded everything from it but the word "God."<sup>18</sup> Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, though less interested than Anselm in logic or analysis, more interested rather in spiritual growth, outlined his program for

Cistercian mysticism by beginning with man's love for himself as the first step in his search for God. In his *Liber de Diligendo Deo*, Bernard describes love, which arises first from "amor carnalis quo ante omnia homo diligit seipsum propter seipsum" [love of the flesh by which man loves himself before everything on account of himself] and arrives at the spiritual level "cum nec seipsum diligit homo nisi propter Deum" [whenever man does not love himself except on account of God].

This alternative epistemology also manifests itself in both the writings on friendship of Aelred de Rivaulx<sup>20</sup> and the writings on preaching of Guibert de Nogent. Here is Guibert:

Nulla enim praedicatio salubrior mihi videtur quam illa quae hominem sibi met ostendat, et foras extra se sparsum in interiori suo, hoc est in mente, restituat atque eum coarquens quodammodo depictum ante faciem suam statuatur.<sup>21</sup>

[Truly no preaching seems to me more beneficial than that which displays a man to himself, replaces in his inner self, that is in his mind, what is extended outside of himself, and which in a certain way places him conclusively represented before his own eyes.]

Although this epistemology pervades the thinking of many significant writers of the twelfth century, like Peter Damiani, William of Saint Thierry, and John of Salisbury, it finds its most famous proponent in Peter Abelard, for whom it substantiated as famous a series of actions as works. The headnote of Abelard's *Ethics* reads: "Incipit Liber Magistri Petri Abelardi Qui Dicitur Scito Te Ipsum." Moreover, whatever may have been the doctrinal or moral reasons for writing *Historia Calamitatum*, in it Abelard offers a method of discovering meaning and purpose in life by the analytic scrutiny of one's own actions.<sup>22</sup>

The emphasis on self that this epistemology at once enabled and produced appeared no less strongly in the realm of vernacular writing than it did in the realm of Latin. The first generation of writers of chivalric romance in the twelfth century explored a world centered upon the individual in which the subjective interpretation of reality was the norm, although "a reaction against the individual centered world-view of the twelfth century literature" seems to have taken place



in the prose cycles that developed early in the thirteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, philosophers of the thirteenth century continued to develop the alternative epistemological method that begins with the self and the senses. In consequence, they separated themselves increasingly from theologians, to whom the metaphysical premise of God as a first cause remained the prior consideration. Their attempts at systematizing this alternative epistemological method were sustained by newly translated commentaries on Aristotle, which reached the Christian West from Spain.

It is well known that the "new" Aristotle generated an enormous amount of philosophical activity in the thirteenth century. Like Augustinianism, the new Aristotelianism was interested in metaphysics. Unlike Augustinianism, however, it emphasized the sensible world and our awareness of it. Saint Thomas Aquinas's famous axiom encapsulates the matter succinctly: "Nihil in intellectu, nisi prius fuerit in sensu" [Nothing is in the intellect unless it was first in the senses]. Since the senses give us our first awareness, the system of reality that the mind constructs from experience must first rest on sensory apprehension of the world. Whereas Augustinianism, like all Platonic epistemology, begins with the metaphysical assumption that the Creator reveals or illumines us with the truth of his existence, i.e., his Essence, the Aristotelian epistemology that philosophers like Aquinas investigate accents the prior importance of the senses to all knowledge and the process of existence and its fulfillment (haecceity) as the mind reasons itself toward that same metaphysical understanding.<sup>24</sup>

Actually, Aquinas never intended to abandon the Augustinian epistemological method in favor of the Aristotelian. In fact, his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (1258) in large measure attacks the implications of certain of Averroes' Aristotelian principles that, if accepted, threatened the validity of Augustinian theology.<sup>25</sup> Rather, much of Averroes' writing attempts to undo this threat by trying to align the role of reason, which the philosopher explored, and the role of revelation, which the theologian explored, for the ultimate and same metaphysical end of knowing God.<sup>26</sup>

Other philosophers, however, like Siger of Brabant and Boetius of Dacia, known as the "radical Aristotelians," sought to defend Averroes' doctrines by developing the concept of the double truth. Accord-

ing to the concept of the double truth, when a conclusion in philosophy is logically reached but contradicts the conclusion of theology, the truths of both conclusions may stand as long as they are kept categorically separate, the one true for philosophy, the other true for theology. Historians of philosophy find the idea of the double truth significant because it means the separation of theology from philosophy. I find the idea interesting because it suggests that as early as the thirteenth century people understood truth to exist in kinds and to reside in alternatives; moreover philosophers were willing to allow contradiction to remain unresolved. The idea of the double truth thus provides an early philosophical analogue for the skepticism of certainty that Chaucer, among other writers of the late Middle Ages, expresses in his poetry.<sup>27</sup>

The official church consistently condemned such a possibility as a double truth. Yet the notion enjoyed wide consideration in the universities throughout the last decades of the thirteenth century and created vigorous intellectual controversies.<sup>28</sup> For the most part, these controversies, like the double truth itself, result from the competition between Augustinian and Aristotelian methods for understanding reality. Assuming that metaphysics was possible and demonstrable, Aristotelians emphasized deduction through the evidence of the senses. The direction of their reasoning thus changed the process by which the will moved to an understanding of God. Opposed to these thinkers were Augustinians, Duns Scotus and William of Ockham the most famous of them, who believed that this method of reasoning ultimately determined God's motives by making them susceptible to man's reasoning power. They sought to insure the freedom of the will of both God and man by denying that commonly held theological conclusions, like God's existence, His free will, and man's understanding of it, could be rationally demonstrated. Rather they argued that such truths could only be known in the light of revelation.<sup>29</sup>

William of Ockham's ideas are most significant for us not only because they won widest favor in the English universities of Chaucer's day but because they are pivotal in the development of our modern way of understanding reality. According to Ockham intuitive knowledge, what the mind knows only by experience, is the only knowledge that represents reality existing outside one's mind. Ockham tells us: "Nihil

potest naturaliter cognosci in se nisi cognoscat intuitive" [Nothing can be known naturally in itself unless it is known intuitively].<sup>30</sup> Abstraction, the process by which the mind systematizes and universalizes particulars—a kind of knowledge since it involves a mental process—is actually a reflection that the mind makes, not necessarily a part of the object the mind perceives: "Abstractiva autem est ista virtute cuius de re contingenti non potest sciri evidenter utrum sit vel non sit" [Abstractive ability, moreover, is that by whose power concerning a contingent matter there can be no evident knowledge of whether it exists or does not exist].<sup>31</sup> Since abstract knowledge derives from the perceiving mind and not from the object that the senses experience, universals exist only within the mind. Value, which inheres in the universal and from which ethics derives, cannot reside in experiential reality. It is rather a mental construct, intrinsic in the mind and having reference to systems within the mind.

Ockham's philosophy not only isolates intuitive from abstract knowledge in a way that had not been done before; in effect it denies an intrinsic, independent reality to anything that the senses do not perceive. Particulars are intrinsically real, but they are not ethically charged in themselves. Universals and the things pertaining to them, like ethical principles, are purely mental concepts, deriving from an authority that ranges from the wisdom of the ancient teachers like Aristotle and Augustine to the incontrovertible and free will of God revealed by grace, as in the Ten Commandments. Universals have no existence within the bounds of sense experience.

Although Ockham's ideas enjoyed widespread popularity in the universities throughout the fourteenth century, there is no indication of how many people actually believed with the philosophers of the *via moderna*, those who followed Ockham, that reality could be known from within the mind and intentionally by means of authority or conceptualization and from outside the mind by the experience of sense data. There is an indication that theologians like Bishop Bradwardine and John Wycliff attacked the principles and attitudes of the *via moderna*, particularly the skepticism about knowledge that these Ockhamist principles implied.<sup>32</sup> The vehemence of the attacks suggests first that there was something profoundly threatening to Christian tradition in what these philosophers were saying and, second, that the subversive

tendencies that they were manifesting were significant. The threatening quality lay in the separation of physics from metaphysics and of particulars from universals. The subversive significance lay in the fact that one had a fragmented knowledge and was consequently unable to make a total statement about the meaning and purpose of God's entire creation on the basis of experiential knowledge. It was not that the universe became, thus, purposeless; it was rather that its purpose was unknowable. As a further and perhaps more significant consequence, God's will became more distant than had heretofore been felt, and man's will and its freedom were not clearly aligned with that of God.

The followers of the *via moderna* in the fourteenth century were led by their reasoning to establish a new epistemological category of possibility, which the philosophers themselves called neutrality. Until that time a proposition had been considered either true or false. But motivated by the premise of the absolute freedom and limitlessness of God's will, and accepting Ockham's distinction between experiential and conceptual, or mental, knowledge, these philosophers argued that future contingency was neither true nor false until the will of God had been made manifest. Hence propositions dealing with contingency, formerly considered true or false, now could be possible. Gordon Leff explains the matter thus:

Once it is conceded that an object need not be *A* to the exclusion of *B* it follows that either is possible. It is by this means that the skeptics discussed God and His ways, allowing that it was possible for Him to follow any course of action. This in turn led to indeterminacy: the lack of any certain order to which possibility gives rise. Thus when one course is as likely for God as another (neutrality), any is possible (possibility), and there is no means of determining the outcome (indeterminacy).<sup>33</sup>

In their original zeal to protect God's omniscience, these thinkers were led to doubt the ability of the individual mind to know His plans. If we cannot know God's plans by experience, then the meaning of experience becomes uncertain.

Ockham and his followers had argued that the mind could not know universality in an experiential way. Reality thus could be known from within the mind and intentionally by means of conceptualization or authority, and it could be known from outside the mind by the experi-

ence of sense data. This notion of cognitive indeterminacy provides a philosophical analogue to what I am calling inconclusiveness in Chaucer's poetry: a frequent inability on the part of the Chaucerian "voice" to derive universal or certain meaning from the elements of his experience, an inclination to avoid drawing conclusions. As we shall see, inconclusiveness has epistemological and psychological correlatives within Chaucer's poetry in the skepticism and ambivalence that the Chaucerian "voice" continually manifests.

### III

Despite the information that social and philosophical historians have provided, most attempts to place Chaucer in a historical context that is not Augustinian have been based on the idea of a Gothic style of architecture that flourished roughly from the twelfth through the first half of the fourteenth centuries in Western Europe. Insofar as the style and structure of a Gothic cathedral expresses through stone and glass a perceived idea of reality, the analogy with literature of the time is apt, and literary criticism must be grateful to art history for the paradigm of the Gothic vision of reality. Chaucerians such as Muscatine, Robertson, Payne, Jordan, and Howard, different as they are in their interpretations of Chaucer, assume and use this architectural analogy of a poised balance, a spatially harmonized synthesis of disparate parts. Yet the zeal with which Chaucerians have undertaken to establish a "Gothic" Chaucer has had two limiting effects: it has imposed upon Chaucer's verbal medium of representation a terminology from a plastic medium; and, perhaps in consequence of this imposition, it has made Chaucer's poetry appear to represent a reality far more monolithic, secure, and static than I think it actually represents.

Long ago Lessing argued in his *Laocöon* for the distinction in criticism between the spatial and the temporal arts, a distinction that "Gothic" criticism must of necessity minimize. The eye perceives the total form of a spatial structure. Only afterward does the mind analyze the dimension, the particular diversity and variety of its form. The ear/eye perceives the total form of a narrative temporally, especially in the Middle Ages, when silent reading was unusual. The mind expects wholeness from a narrative, but that expectation is not fulfilled until the reader has experienced all its parts piecemeal in a flow of patterns.

Meaning develops in narrative periodically as the mind relates part to part and eventually part to whole. Medieval rhetoricians lavished attention on beginnings and transitions because they provide audiences with conventional directional signals and create expectations that may or may not be fulfilled as the work unfolds through time. Even granting that Gothic art's spatial paradigm represents a functional concept of reality in a temporal medium like a Chaucerian narrative, the tenor of thought that the model offers, although sustained at times by an optimistic sense that all might be ordered, was never as monolithic in the centuries during which it developed and flourished as the architectural analogy implies.

The energy and optimism of the twelfth century produced a series of cohesive and eloquent structures, spatial and temporal, artistic and intellectual, that glorified God and God's creation by delighting in man and the creativity of his mind. Structures like a Gothic cathedral or a scholastic *summa* indicate a commitment well into the thirteenth century to understanding a transcendent reality in God by analyzing parts of the whole. Although their ordering principle is different from our own, the diverse parts of both cathedral and *summa* express an idea of totality. Whether or not they have been completed, they indicate a belief in attaining wholeness by attention to parts. They understand totality, the physical and metaphysical, to be contained within the particular. People of the first half of the thirteenth century were able to see heaven in a grain of sand.

But attitudes changed as the thirteenth century moved toward its close. Skepticism of the possibility of achieving wholeness increased, and thought grew disillusioned with the idea of totality it had earlier entertained. By the end of the thirteenth century and through the early decades of the fourteenth, as we have seen, philosophers were challenging the notion of wholeness, even delighting in the mind's ability to extend its completest knowledge to the part. Historians of art are generally aware of this changing attitude toward the idea of totality during the period they call Gothic. Chaucerians notice the fact but tend not to let it interfere with their paradigm of Gothic by which they interpret Chaucer.<sup>34</sup> In consequence, the notion of the Gothic Chaucer is limiting because it freezes meaning, suggesting a unified sense of reality, when in fact Chaucer's poetry offers a fluid and by no means

harmonious sense of reality, especially when examined from the point of view of its development.

A corollary to what I am calling the limiting notion of a Gothic Chaucer is the equally unsatisfying concept of the moral Chaucer whose didactic purpose is clear. If criticism seeks to explain meaning in a work of art, morally based interpretations are indeed useful. Yet every reader of Chaucer knows that the didactic nature of his poetry is neither simple nor always clear. Chaucer's abiding interest in the value of experience and authority and in the extent and limits of earthly love and human power rarely reveal a consistent or conclusive morality. More often than not, they suggest how difficult it is to evaluate human behavior and human goals in light of traditional ethical doctrines. Because Chaucer composes in narrative forms that are either subjective and interior, like his dream visions, or heavily mediated by a subjective consciousness with particular rather than universal desires and claims, like *Troilus* and the *Canterbury Tales*, and because Chaucer is the master of a complicated ironic technique, his didacticism is hard to define. In fact, it seems closer to the experience of Chaucer's works to say that he is more interested in exploring what poetry can say about reality than he is in evaluating human behavior for a didactic purpose. Therefore, instead of focusing on Chaucer's didactic concerns, I shall examine how his poetry expresses epistemological concerns.

My reasons for doing so are three. First, what is unclear or inconclusive about the moral nature of Chaucer's work can be better explained by examining his epistemology, for the moral nature of the poetry depends on the poet's interest in the ways in which one can know, in what kind of knowledge is certain and what merely possible, in the perceptual relationship of subject and object in the act of knowing, and in the end of knowing, especially by means of poetry. In short, Chaucer wants to know how a poet can understand and articulate his world and human behavior in it. Second, emphasizing epistemology in Chaucer's poetry will help us recognize why and in what ways the poetry is inconclusive, for the inconclusiveness of many of the narratives has its source in epistemological problems of certainty that Chaucer repeatedly confronts. Finally, this shift in critical focus will explain how Chaucer's inconclusiveness accounts for his experiments with narrative form throughout his career that culminate in the discov-

ery of the unique form of the *Canterbury Tales*. Such an examination should not be thought of as inimical to didactic or thematic interpretations, but rather as related to them in its attempt to get at meaning and expression in Chaucer. Ethics and epistemology, like content and form, may be discreet categories of thought, but they are neither mutually exclusive nor independent of each other.<sup>35</sup>



## II. "I Have Gret Wonder": Inconclusiveness and the *Book of the Duchess*



Any examination of the development of Chaucer's narrative poetry must begin with the dream visions. Chaucer wrote them first and developed in them an unusual persona whose "voice" pervades all his later works.<sup>1</sup> Like all visionary literature, the dream vision is a complexly subjective form. The poet takes a ver-

sion of self, generally in a benighted state, and provides him with experiences, generally in the allegorical mode, intended to lead to some kind of understanding. The audience identifies with the persona's heightened state of emotion, yet the sympathy is condescending because the persona is naïve, obtuse, limited. He does not always achieve understanding by the end, but the audience usually experiences some relevant moral enlightenment or emotional satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

Chaucer's dream visions are considerably different from most visionary literature and create considerably different effects. Although each poem uses allegorization, its mode is not allegorical. Consequently the persona is not an element of self, like *l'Amant* or Will, encountering other aspects of self, like *Reson* or *Imaginatif*. In Chaucer's dream visions, the persona is always a whole character, and we feel as whole the other characters he meets, like the Black Knight, the Eagle, the anonymous "frend" of the *House of Fame*. To ensure that we experience the persona within the dream as a complete personality, Chaucer takes pains to have him describe his activities and feelings before the dream, and periodically within the dream to refer to his waking self and its particular history.

Chaucer's persona in the dream visions is a consistent character. He is an anxiety-ridden, muddleheaded but well-intentioned, shy, sentimental, bedazzled poet, seeking knowledge and experience for his poetry, and continually amazed by the complexity of the world around him. He is insecure about his ability to articulate clearly and justly the

meaning of all he sees, reads, and dreams, yet he is determined to try, while asking the indulgence of his audience for his own tentativeness. Chaucer's persona is essentially a bookish personality, less comfortable even in dreams with grand flights above the earth than with sitting in his study reading. There is no particular order to his reading, no particular subject he pursues. He reads for the sake of reading. Sometimes his books are classical poems, like those of Vergil and Ovid (or versions of Vergil and Ovid); sometimes they are dream allegories; sometimes they are works about love; and sometimes they are moral and philosophical treatises. More important than any order to his reading is his insatiable appetite for books, the frequent listings of which direct our attention to his serious epistemological concerns. Geoffrey is not, however, only a poet and a voracious reader. He was once a lover, he has a wife and a job, he likes to eat, he is acquainted with the night, and apparently he has trouble getting up in the morning. The objects of Chaucer's dream visions change, but the persona remains a consistently presented subject who matures but never loses his charmingly inept nature.<sup>3</sup>

Without the allegorical mode common to visionary literature, this remarkable subject takes on mimetic complexity, and his narratives become highly specialized fictions in which he seeks personal meaning from experience and generally does not find it. Other authors who choose the visionary form generally know what they want to say about an issue. Chaucer chooses the form, rather, to explore what of significance he *can* say. He offers not a guided vision but only a first person who mediates all he encounters through the prism of his own uncertainty. An apparent connection rarely exists between the persona's serious concerns and the didactic information that the figures in the dream offer him. In fact, a frequent lack of connection between the persona's concerns and the phenomena of his experience produces a sense of incongruity in which meaning remains tentative. As we read, our continuing uncertainty keeps us wondering about what the enigmatic phenomena signify—a whelp, waves of petitioning spirits, a gate with contradictory signs. Chaucer's early dream visions concern the ways in which the mind tries to make sense of the hubbub of experience. But they do not make that sense for us.

Just as the philosophers of the fourteenth century investigated and

developed an epistemology that offered as an end in itself the notion of possibility, or neutrality, Chaucer's early dream visions investigate and develop indeterminate, possible meaning as an end of the literary enterprise. Chaucer develops a narrative form in which meaning is either incongruous or indeterminate. Questions the persona asks do not get answered, confused issues and concepts do not get cleared up, experiences are not generally illuminating. The ambivalence of the persona provides a psychological corollary to indeterminacy. As early as the *Book of the Duchess*, we experience a world not only mediated through a persona's experience, as in all dream visions, but a world in which the persona's ambivalence charges the atmosphere of the poems with ambivalence.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer illustrates why indeterminacy of meaning may have to serve as an end in itself in literature. Late in book three, the persona notices "a lesynge and a sad soth" (2089) brought together "of aventure" in an attempt to get out the window of the whirling House of Rumor. Neither of them can leave through the window, presumably to fly to earth via Fame's house, because one is "achekked" by the other. In order to expedite the matter, the two make a pact to merge, to become one so that what is true and what is false in the rumor will never again be separable:

"Lat me go first!" "Nay, but let me!  
And her I wol ensuren the  
Wyth the nones that thou wolt do so,  
That I shal never fro the go,  
But be thyn owne sworn brother!  
We wil medle us ech with other,  
That no man, be they never so wrothe,  
Shal han on [of us] two, but bothe  
At ones, al besyde his leve,  
Come we a-morwe or on eve,  
Be we cried or stille yrouned."  
Thus saugh I fals and soth compouned  
Togeder fle for oo tydyng.

[2097-2107]

Chaucer may have found the admixture of truth and falsehood in *Metamorphoses* 12. 54-55; however, he invented the dramatic statement, the bargaining, the language with its metaphor of sworn

brotherhood. These lines show how rumor is a compounding of inimical polarities, how each must sacrifice the clear outline of its identity to ensure that it will reach its destination.

The combination of truth and falsehood that constitutes rumor may also be said to constitute reputation and, by extension, the varied, authoritative, and famous documents from which the Chaucerian persona, and presumably the poet himself, seeks knowledge and answers to his many questions. It underlies the skepticism about knowing with certainty nonexperiential truths that appear throughout the dream visions. Because Chaucer is a poet and not a philosopher, however, he expresses this epistemological theme not logically but imaginatively, using the subjective dream experience as the denominator of value in his quest for answers.

Let us look specifically at each of Chaucer's early dream visions. Although they are traditionally placed together because they were written during the first segment of Chaucer's career, I shall treat the *Book of the Duchess* separately in this chapter, holding until the next my examination of the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*. Whereas the two later poems deal squarely with epistemological issues, the *Book of the Duchess*, more heavily dependent on the French *dits amoureux*,<sup>4</sup> has an affective concern—how to alleviate grief. Despite its difference, however, the *Book of the Duchess* is important for our consideration because it exhibits problems with conclusiveness that its structural indirection and a complicated use of the persona create.

## II

The subject of the *Book of the Duchess* is grief, its theme how to use grief constructively to face the fact of death. Continued critical interest in the poem suggests that although the meaning of its content is by and large clear, its form expresses that meaning unusually.<sup>5</sup> About one-third through the poem, the Black Knight's grief becomes the poem's subject as his voice assumes proportions of greater significance than the persona's. Only then do its conventions begin to feel consequent, does its direction begin to grow clear, its meaning begin to cohere. From the beginning until this point, however—more than four hundred and fifty lines—the subject of the *Book of the Duchess* is never clear. Con-

ventions appear and disappear in a sequence of such subtle indirection that first readers, without memory of a coherent last part, grow confused.

The first thirty lines thrust us immediately into an intense dramatic situation with no explanation for its cause. A persona suffers from insomnia, which creates affectlessness in him—"for I have felynge in nothyng" (11). The first nine lines are a translation of Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*. The next twenty lines amplify the material in the first nine, assimilating elements from poems by Machaut.<sup>6</sup> The loss of "quiykness," of "al lustyhede" (20) described in the opening is a familiar enough convention of the *diis amoreux*. It leads us to believe that this will be a poem about love in which a persona, probably a lover, will eventually fall asleep and dream either about the nature of love or the nature of his beloved. The conventionality of the opening leads us to expect that the persona's insomnia and his "sorwfull ymagynacioun" (14) derive from love-longing. Some lines later the persona explicitly directs our attention to the cause of his state when he voices the question that the opening lines have raised:

But men myght axe me why soo  
I may not sleepe, and what me is.

[30-31]

But to our surprise he tells us that he does not know—"Myselven can not telle why / the sothe" (34-35). He refers to an eight-year illness and to an unavailable physician, but he refuses to give the details of the situation, "passe we over untill eft."<sup>7</sup> Instead he returns to "our first mater" (43).

The persona's refusal does not function like a standard *occupatio*, abbreviating the presentation of content by telling us in a clause or two what it claims not to be doing. It leads us rather to puzzle about the illness and the unavailable physician, a rhetorical commonplace for the mistress of courtly tradition:<sup>8</sup>

For there is phisicien but oon  
That may me hele; but that is don.  
Passe we over untill eft;  
That wil not be mot nede be left.

[39-42]

The finality in the persona's tone is unusual. When a troubadour, or a minnesinger, or any courtly poet complains about rejection by his lady, the poet's tone is generally different. It either remains optimistically faithful despite bleak prospects, or it turns bitter and directs an ego-saving satire at the previously wonderful qualities of the beloved. Wyatt's famous concluding question, "Pray what hath she deserved?", indicates the bitter mood as it came to be expressed in English. In the *Book of the Duchess*, however, the lover accepts the end of the relationship. Despite his statement that he will return to this problem later, which he never specifically does, there is a nonjudgmental finality in the proverb, suggesting that the persona is trying to come to terms with his problem, even if his desperate insomnia indicates that he is not as successful as he would like to be.

Returning to the first matter of his insomnia, then, the persona leads us away from the answer to the question that the opening poses, leaving us only with our earlier expectations that this work might after all be a dream vision in the standard sense. Since the persona wants to fall asleep and decides to read "a romaunce" that will "drive the night away" (49) if he cannot, we expect the kind of dream poem in which a persona will fall asleep while reading a book. But instead of falling asleep, this persona gets involved with the significance of reading itself—a *topos* Chaucer will use again in the *Legend of Good Women*. "Clerkes" and "other poets," he tells us, put stories in rhyme

To rede, and for to be in minde,  
While men loved the lawe of kinde,  
This bok ne spak but of such thinges,  
Of quenes lives, and of kinges,  
And many other thinges smale.

[55-59]

To understand human nature from the exemplary conduct of kings and queens is a common *moralitas*, but the persona lightens the seriousness of the issue when he tells us that his manuscript contains less serious matters as well, "other thinges smale." He then directs our attention to one specific story, the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone, which he finds "a wonder thing" (61) and decides to retell.

So far we have covered only sixty lines, which can probably be read

or heard in less time than it has taken to read these pages about them. Chaucer's opening, however, has not given us any particular sense of direction. Rather, it has undercut whatever sense of direction the standard conventions would otherwise suggest. If we have not begun to doubt by this time that the poem will be a dream vision, we certainly begin to doubt the matter over the course of the next two hundred lines, which reiterate Ovid's story with Chaucer's own long additions. Like the opening, these lines generally concern grief, death, and sleep, but not in any way that appears an assertive move in a particular direction. From the beginning of the poem through the point where the persona actually does fall asleep, he has been circling around points, implying, suggesting, but never stating or showing the subject of his poem. What has opened as a poem about a persona's experience, suggesting by its conventions that the experience will be related to love in the form of a dream, has turned into a poem recounting an Ovidian tale at which an audience familiar with the story would have been surprised when Chaucer humorously interpolated the incident in the cave of sleep. However, the serious nature of this story suggests a relationship between the persona's insomnia and a grave loss, recognition of which leads us to reconsider the tenor of the persona's metaphor about the skilled physician and the implications of the proverb that follows it. From the Ovidian tale, we have intuited a model that might represent the cause of the persona's condition. But the humorous interpolation of the cave of sleep that follows avoids articulating the cause by returning us to the persona's condition, his insomnia. We follow his interest in the "goddes of slepyng," (230) his protestation that he "ne knew never god but oon" (237) and his offer of a featherbed covered with imported silk and gold for the gift of sleep. As if these gods accept his offer, he immediately falls asleep and has a dream "so wonderful" that he offers us a catalogue of the finest interpreters of dreams who would not be able to interpret his dream properly (275-90).

Actually, the challenge to interpret the upcoming dream should not be surprising, since the persona has thrown out several possible hints on what the dream might be about. Consequently, the audience cannot understand where the poem is heading, what its subject will be, or for what purpose the persona is telling us his tale. After nearly three hundred lines of meanderings, startings and stoppings, significances

implied but never asserted, conventions that do not cohere according even to standard medieval expectations, the most that can be asserted about the disorder of the opening of the *Book of the Duchess* is that the persona suffers from lack of sleep. The convention of the sleepless lover that Froissart had used as a springboard to his poem has been extended beyond its function as an introductory commonplace. It has been made the poem's subject, to which the persona has continually returned after sundry excursions into other matters. Even the story of Ceyx and Alcyone has functioned, to this point at least, only to introduce the persona to Morpheus. The metamorphosis of Ceyx and Alcyone into seabirds who maintain their conjugal condition could have provided a splendid emblem of love and Christian salvation, but it has been dropped.

The only consistent response that the audience has been invited to feel about the many elements of the first three hundred lines of the *Book of the Duchess* is wonder. From the opening line, in which the persona tells us he has "gret wonder" that he cannot sleep, through the story of Ceyx and Alcyone, which he tells us "me thoughte a wonder thing" (61), through Alcyone's "wonder that the king ne com / hom" (78-79), through the persona's "wonder" that there might be gods who grant sleep (233-36), and finally to the dream itself, which was "so wonderful" (276) that no expert could interpret it, Chaucer has presented us with a persona in wonderland, where all things are strange, marvelous, and apparently make little sense. As our guide in this wonderland, the persona leaves us with the same sense of bemused wonder that he himself feels about all aspects of his experience. Nor does this wonder stop within the dream.

The elements of the dream that the persona experiences before he meets the Black Knight are as wondrous as those elements before the dream. They also lack a specific sense of direction. The aviary choirs, the stained glass windows with scenes of various historical romances that greet the persona as he wakes into his dream, have the unspecific conventionality that we expect from the genre. The images are noisy, glorious, potentially signifying. To these images Chaucer adds, either by sloppy technique or by intention, the not-so-conventional image of the naked persona (293) responding to hunting horns by leaving his chamber with a horse who also resides in the chamber. In any case,



these elements have about them the effect of a real dreamwork.<sup>9</sup> When the persona meets the hunter, we learn of a hart-hunting expedition under the auspices of Emperor Octavian. The conventional implications of the hunt and the symbolic implications of the emperor's name suggest that the dream might concern some possibly occasional matter about love.<sup>10</sup> But Chaucer neither develops the symbolic implications nor suggests any relationship between the hunt and the first part of the poem. He does not even develop the incident. Instead a whelp guides the persona away from the activity into the peaceable kingdom of the forest where he overhears the Black Knight at his song.

The Knight's lyric, in a complicated rhyme scheme that modern editions tend to obscure, marks the core of meaning in the poem's form and begins the narrative section concerned with the process of consolation:<sup>11</sup>

I have of sorwe so gret won  
That joye get I never non,  
Now that I see my lady bryght,  
Which I have loved with al my myght,  
Is fro me ded and ys agoon.  
  
Allas, deth, what ayleth the,  
That thou noldest have taken me,  
Whan thou toke my lady swete,  
That was so fair, so fresh, so fre,  
So good, that men may wel se  
Of al goodnesse she had no mete!

[475-86]

The attentive reader might associate the content and mood of the Knight's song with the story of Ceyx and Alcyone. But the association would remain tentative, especially since the persona disregards what the lyric says.<sup>12</sup> Because courtly love lyrics represent emotional states through conventional metaphors, the lyric appears less a statement of truth or fact at the time of its utterance than a "making," one more wondrous, unconnected element in the narrative.

Because we have been following the persona through his experiences, we do not recognize that the lyric represents the poem's central concern. This recognition occurs much later. More than three hundred lines after the lyric, the Black Knight remarks at being misunderstood:

Thou wost ful lytel what thou menest;  
I have lost more than thou wenest.

[743-44]

Four hundred lines later, the exasperated knight reiterates the charge; then two hundred lines later, just before the end of the poem, he says it again. The repetition becomes a widely spaced refrain of frustration that directs the conversation between persona and Black Knight toward a resolution.<sup>13</sup> Until this late point in the poem, however, when we recognize the statement as a refrain, the interchange between the Knight and persona has appeared incongruous, like all the elements that preceded it. The problem has been one of mixed modes of communication, the Knight speaking about personal loss in conventional tropes, the persona taking the tropes to be expressing actuality. For instance, the Knight has represented the loss of his beloved through the extended metaphor of a chess game with Fortune:

For fals Fortune hath pleyd a game  
Atte ches with me, allas the while!  
.....  
With hir false draughtes dyvers  
She staal on me, and tok my fers.

[618-55]

To which the persona has literalistically responded:

But ther is no man alyve her  
Wolde for a fers make this woo!

[740-41]

By the end of the conversation, we have recognized how the persona's responses have frustrated the Knight, forcing him to peel off the metaphorical layers with which he has been smothering the plain fact that his mistress is dead. During the exchange, however, we have been primarily aware of the incongruous mixture of humor with pathos that the indirection earlier in the poem at once prepared us to experience and reinforced.

The *Book of the Duchess* is Chaucer's first testing ground for what poetry can and cannot do, what it can and cannot tell about the nature of reality, in this case emotional reality. The conclusive elements in the poem occur precisely because Chaucer retains in the section containing

the Black Knight's complaint the objectifying conventionalism of the tradition.<sup>14</sup> This section, for which Chaucer ostensibly wrote the entire poem, feels more conclusive than all the parts leading to it because Chaucer has used the Black Knight as a courtly lover and poet. The Knight's diction and his point of view represent a literal phenomenon metaphorically. Ironically, the metaphor, not the phenomenon, keeps this section of the poem squarely in the tradition of internalized dream vision and makes it identifiable and understood. In fact, the conventionalism of the dream vision always functions as an objectifying force in an essentially subjective form. From the Black Knight, for example, we learn the courtly way of expressing perception. It is a universalizing way, painting the lady with a long series of conventional attributes of goodness and beauty and himself as the equally conventional lover who flourishes in her grace (759-1297).

On the other hand, the inconclusive elements within the poem's form occur because of the energy and intensity with which Chaucer uses the naïve and literal-minded persona. The *Book of the Duchess* is the first of Chaucer's narrative works taking the self as a character whose experiences in a dream do not produce the enlightenment the character seeks. The persona begins his discourse as a lover unable to sleep and ends up a poet who has experienced a manifold and confusing set of wonders.

Thys ys so queynt a sweven  
That I wol, be processe of tyme,  
Fonde to put this sweven in ryme  
As I kan best, and that anoon.

[1330-33]

The dream has had a salubrious effect on his insomnia, but it has not satisfied his literalistic and quite dogged curiosity, a curiosity he will express even more clearly in the dream visions following this one.

In the persona of the *Book of the Duchess*, we see Chaucer's first creation of a character who functions in a psychologically plausible way, whose needs shape the forms of the first-person narratives Chaucer writes, but whose experiences within the narratives are so different from the needs that appear to have produced them that we do not feel strongly the enlightenment we expect from visionary poetry. The more Chaucer emphasizes himself as a character with particular questions

and needs, the more the form of his poetry grows inconclusive. The less this character provides a didactic, exemplary quality, the less the form provides the conclusive values that other poems in the tradition do.

The *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* develop more fully than the *Book of the Duchess* this character of the self as an individual with a complicated emotional life. Despite the persona's earnest attempts to establish certainty in them, he responds with considerable ambivalence to the conventional characters and objectifying elements he encounters. He is, moreover, ambivalent about the certainty of physical and metaphysical facts, of literal and metaphorical perceptions, and of particular and general judgments. As a result he is unable to conclude the issues that motivate his reading, his searching, his desire to be able to express the truth about reality in poetry. The difference between the two dream-vision experiments that follow the *Book of the Duchess* is that one is an uncomfortably inconclusive narrative form and the other is comfortably inconclusive.

### III. "Betwixen Adamauntes Two": Conceptual Inconclusiveness in the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*



Because the *House of Fame* breaks off near what is clearly its end, the incomplete state of the text seems to bear on the commonly felt inconclusiveness of its form.<sup>1</sup> Critical debate about the man who "seemed for to be / A man of gret auctoritee" (2157-58) suggests that identifying him or his function would reveal the occasion for the poem, or in some way help us understand better its illusive meaning so that we would not need to accept inconclusiveness as a poetic condition in Chaucer.<sup>2</sup> However, since poems like Gottfried's *Tristan* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* remind us that incomplete works are not necessarily inconclusive, the incompleteness of the *House of Fame* may not be responsible for the inconclusiveness of its form. Rather inconclusiveness may account for its incompleteness.

Like the other dream visions of Chaucer's early period, the *House of Fame* presents a shifting and unresolved sense of what it is about.<sup>3</sup> Each of its books concerns different conceptual problems, the logical contingencies of which are not fully apparent. The first book deals chiefly with literary transmission; the second is about the poet as student and the physics of sound; and the third examines the nature of fame and its relationship to rumor. As in the other dream visions, Chaucer filters these shifting concerns through the anxious persona, who responds with ambivalence and skepticism to most of what he sees and hears.<sup>4</sup>

Fear creates the persona's anxiety from the beginning: "God turne us every drem to goode" (1). Between a wish and a prayer, this utterance asks a simple effect—good is simple—from an obscurely understood set of causes about to be enumerated. Chaucer takes the posture of a simple, perhaps too simple, believer who, after a breathless catalogue about the etiology of dreams (2-51), cannot even form an opinion:

But why the cause is, noght wot I.  
 Wel worthe, of this thyng, grete clerkys,  
 That trete of this and other werkis;  
 Nor I of noon opinion  
 Nyl as now make mensyon,  
 But oonly that the holy roode  
 Turne us every drem to goode!

[52-58]

This rhetorical *dubitatio* humorously establishes a skeptical persona, drawn to seek answers, yet ambivalent about their value because the complexity of the issue leaves him mystified, anxious.<sup>5</sup>

Anxiety can be functional. After the proem it motivates an invocation, "at my gynnyng" (66), to the God of sleep "my sweven for to telle aryght" (79), which reveals both the persona's concern for decorum and his skepticism of the invocation's efficacy—"Yf every drem stonde in his myght" (80). It produces a defensive prayer for the poem's reception: to eternal God (81-82) the persona prays for the reward of "joye" (83) for all "that take hit wel and skorne hyt noght" (91), and to "Jesus God" (97) he prays, curiously, that those who "mysdeme hyt" (97) receive "every harm that any man / Hath had, syth the world began" (99-100)—"I am no bet in charyte!" (108). This anxiety, moreover, reappears early in book one where we learn that the persona falls asleep in exhaustion like a pilgrim who goes to the shrine of Saint Leonard "to make lythe of that was hard" (118).<sup>6</sup> We do not yet know what is hard, but once asleep the persona undertakes to tell what he saw in the "temple ymad of glas" (120), Venus's temple (130), especially to tell the story whose beginning he sees "written on a table of bras" (142):

I wol now singen, yif I kan  
 The armes, and also the man  
 That first cam, thurgh his destinee,  
 Fugityf of Troy contree,  
 In Itayle, with ful moche pyne  
 Unto the strondes of Lavyne.

[143-48]

Here in octosyllabic couplets we find the first translation in English of the opening of Vergil's *Aeneid*. To the translation the persona has added

a delight-producing clause of personal intention that reveals anxiety about his ability as a translator. This is, after all, a famous work whose opening, at least, every schoolboy knows.

Once we understand that the anxiety relates to the poetic enterprise, we retrospectively understand the persona's confusion about the etiology of dreams, for dreams are the prototype of the form of poetry Chaucer composes. Some kinds, like the *visio*, offer themselves as appropriate models for visionary literature; but others, like this "drem" (62), may be ambiguous—may, in fact, be deceptive or untrue. If dreams are ambiguous or deceptive, Chaucer may have thought, what then is the relationship between dream-vision poetry and truth? More to the point of this dream vision, how does a poet determine what in a source should be directly translated, like the opening; what may be telescoped and varied by paraphrase, like the description of the remaining events of book one of the *Aeneid* (198–225); what may be abridged or summarized, like the last six books of Vergil's poem (429–65); and what may be so fundamental to the translator's purpose that it bears rhetorical amplification, like the betrayal and subsequent bereavement of Dido (240–46)? The anxiety of book one of the *House of Fame*, then, is one about a poet's control, his responsibility as a "makir."

The central activity of book one, occupying 327 of the book's 396 lines, is the persona's telling of the legend of Aeneis as images represent it in the Temple of Glass. But what is the purpose of this activity? If it were simply to tell the story of Aeneis, the undertaking is a colossal failure, for the story that book one presents carries little emotional force and less narrative interest. Sheila Delany claims that its purpose is to suggest the dualizing effect on this famous legend created by intertwining elements of Ovid's sentimental version with Vergil's.<sup>7</sup> But then why does the persona go out of his way to claim as his own Dido's moving complaint, which appropriates Ovid's pathetic tonality?

In suche wordes gan to pleyne  
Dydo of hir grete peyne,  
As me mette redely;  
Non other auctour allege I.

Actually, the purpose of the activity appears not to be related specifically to the content of the legend. Rather it describes the relationship between a storyteller and the medium through which he tells his story. Repeatedly the persona reminds us that we are hearing (reading) his perception of images representing a story, not a story itself—"next that sawgh I" (162), "and I saugh next" (174), "ther sawgh I graven" (193).<sup>8</sup> Instead of responding to events in the content, we watch the persona respond to them. He says "allas" (157) after telling us that he saw Troy destroyed; he comments that he saw

How Creusa was ylost, allas!  
That ded, not I how, she was;  
How he [Aeneis] hir soughte, and how hir gost  
Bad hym to flee the Grekes host.

[183-86]

Instead of representing Aeneis's turbulent journey to Carthage, he reminds us of the emotive power of the images representing the action to him;

There saugh I such tempeste aryse,  
That every herte myght agryse  
To see hyt peynted on the wal.

[209-11]

These persistent intrusions not only distance us from the legendary content, they make the problem of telling interfere with our natural desire to hear a story by creating involvement with the persona and his interests.

The persona's interest in the story is the tragic effect on Dido of believing in the false appearance and false promise of Aeneis (296-374). It is the only part of the story that he chooses to exemplify. The tension between teller and tale, which has accompanied the recitation throughout, dissolves during Dido's lyrical complaint of suffering and remorse. The intrusive persona becomes an unobtrusive narrator: "I saugh" becomes "quod she," and we are enchanted into the fictional plane. This is, of course, the section of the story that the persona calls his own, the significance of which he seeks to verify by the amplified catalogue of tragic lovers who suffered from broken promises (384-426). Except for this section, however, the skeletal telling of the story



of Aeneis is an exercise in recitation, not the telling of a story but the enumerating of the images representing a story.

When the recitation ends, we may wonder why the persona's method changed from telling to showing when he reached the point where Dido confronts her betrayal, her shame, her loss of good reputation.<sup>9</sup> A reasonable inference is that the poem is, or will be, in some way about loss of fame when a mistress is betrayed, Dido being a symbolic example. But Chaucer turns out not to deal with this theme until the *Legend of Good Women*. In book one of the *House of Fame*, the theme is nascent but undeveloped, implying relevance, never revealing it. When the anxiety that opened the poem returns toward the end of book one, the issue of deception in artistic representation replaces the issue of deception in human relationships, which has disappeared. The persona has been impressed by the "noblesse" (471) of the images he has seen in the temple of glass, wondering who "did hem wirche" (474) and "what contree" (475) the temple is in. His discovery, however, that this workshop for his imagination is in a desert where lives "no maner creature / That ys yformed be Nature" (489-90) suggests both an uncertain value to the images and an uncertain value to the experience. Understandably the persona reacts in fear:

"O Crist!" thoughte I, "that art in blysse,  
Fro fantome and illusion  
Me save!"

[492-94]

As Delany has shown, *fantome* and *illusion* are terms expressing the medieval sense of the imagination's power to deceive and mislead.<sup>10</sup> But the appearance of an abstract golden form in the sky, which turns out to be Jove's eagle, provides a note of hope to the anxiety-producing experience.

In book one Chaucer raises questions about the nature and value of poetic appropriation and implies a relationship between the deceptive nature of human communication and the possibly deceptive nature of artistic representation, which is also a form of communication. But he neither provides answers nor draws conclusions. The hopeful appearance of the eagle makes the inconclusiveness of the first part of the poem immaterial, however, because it promises a development of pre-

sumably relevant issues. But what follows does not develop the issues of the first part of the poem. In fact, the eagle flies off on a tangent because none of the answers about the universe and sound that he happily provides relate directly to the questions about truth in love-promises and truth in poetic appropriation from images. Moreover, the relationship of these issues to those presented once the persona reaches the Houses of Fame and Rumor is moot.

The flight to the House of Fame is at once the most intense and most humorous section of the poem. Despite the eagle's reassurances that the flight is meant for his "lore" and "prow" (579), the persona is continually frightened, hardly overcoming his shock at being swept off his feet:

For so astonyed and asweved  
Was every vertu in my heved,  
What with his sours and with my drede,  
That al my felynge gan to dede;  
For-whi hit was to gret affray.

[549-553]

His giddy fear manifests itself in worry about the meaning of the action:

Shal I noon other weyes dye?  
Wher Joves wol me stellyfye,  
Or what thing may this signifye?

[585-87]

It also shows in his negative responses to the eagle's pedagogical offers:

. . . quod he . . .  
"Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?"  
"Nay, certeynly," quod y, "ryght naught."  
"And why?" "For y am now to old."

[992-95]

This humorous negativity occurs because of the persona's frank fear of flying, and of falling. The eagle, after all, has tried to explain the doctrine of the *locus proprius* of every natural object while flying high above the earth with the portly Geoffrey, "noyous for to carye" (574), in his talons.

Yet there is also a remarkable sense of wonder in this part of the dream. Anxious questions about the reliability of dreams and of art as a source of knowledge give way to a sense that what some books teach is true to personal experience, hence worth believing:

For more clere entendement  
Nas me never yit ysent.  
And than thoughte y on Marcian,  
And eke on Antecaudian,  
That sooth was her description  
Of alle the hevenes region,  
As fer as that y sey the preve;  
Therefore y kan hem now beleve.

[983-90]

Later, this new ability to believe in authority gives him the excuse to decline to experience more than he cares to. When the eagle offers to show him firsthand the constellations, the coward in the persona asserts:

"No fors," quod y, "hyt is no nede.  
I leve as wel, so God me spede,  
Hem that write of this matere,  
As though I knew her places here."

[1011-14]

This belief in the truth of literary representation stands in direct contrast to the fear expressed earlier in the poem. The contrast between prior skepticism and current belief suggests a distinction of literary kinds that creates the different responses. Earlier the persona observed representations derived from poetry about legendary history. Here personal experience verifies the observations of scientific and philosophical poets. Science and philosophy (synonymous in the fourteenth century) concern the truth of actuality, what can be proved by reason and the senses—the "sooth" of a thing. Legendary history, on the other hand, concerns the actions of human beings and the moral and psychological elements of human nature that poets report—the "trouthe" of a thing. The persona's experiences at the House of Fame reveal that his fears about "trouthe" in the Temple of Glass were indeed well-founded, for all communication that is not firsthand, like tidings and

legends, must come through Fame, whose Greek cognate, *phēmē*, means *utterance* or *report* and whose nature to Chaucer is morally ambiguous.

To us "Fame" is an attractive phenomenon. To make it connote negatively, we must attach a pejorative adjective (*ill* fame). To Ovid, whose *Fama* provides Chaucer with elements of both Fame and Rumor, the concept simply meant Rumor, which "*veris addere falsa / gaudet*."<sup>11</sup> Chaucer distinguishes between the Latin concept of *Fama*, calling it Rumor (2088–2105), and "Fame," which, closer to our notion, is synonymous with renown:

Heryed be thou and thy name,  
Goddesse of Renoun or of Fame!

[1405–6]

Rumor resembles a kind of inchoate noise or sound that has no verification. Its house is a very large dwelling built with "tymber of no strengthe" (1980). Its ceaseless turning, its axis with no foundation, and its numberless windows suggest randomness, lack of value. About the potential of the House of Rumor to endure, the persona tells us:

Yet hit is founded to endure  
while that hit lyst to Aventure,  
That is the moder of tydynges  
As the see of welles and of sprynges.

[1481–84]

As wells and springs flow from the sea (a curious perception),<sup>12</sup> so Rumor derives from Chance—a principle of absurdity or a principle of "non-principledness."

Fame, on the other hand, represents a stage of this inchoate noise considerably more advanced. She differs from Rumor in that she has a personified form and dwells in a highly ornate castle with towers, halls, bowers, "babewynnes and pynacles" (1189), tabernacles and "habitaclis" (1194), and she has the power to judge. By judging she confers a kind of authentication on the objects of her judgment even though the foundation of her house is a "roche of yse, and not of stel" (1130), and the basis of her judgments are utterly undependable. The long and tedious passage describing the process of Fame's arbitrary judgment indicates at once how frequently her decisions are unjust to

those who plead for earthly renown and how frequently they are just (1520-1867). In addition, Fame has the power to substantiate rumor once Adventure has given it life:

And she gan yeven ech hys name,  
After hir disposicioun,  
And yaf hem eke duracioun

[2112-14]

Finally, Fame has a relationship with poets that counterbalances the negative moral conclusions that her fickle and nonprincipled judgments imply. Running between the dais and wide doors of the great hall of her castle, a series of pillars ensconce statues representing Josephus, Statius, Homer, Dares, Tytys (Dictys), Lollius (whoever he may be), Guido delle Colonne, Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, and Claudian. Each poet represents a category of literary or historical matter like love, the story of Thebes, of Troy, of the Jews, of Rome, and so on. Together their production constitutes the sum of secular historical knowledge, providing poets like Chaucer with content and techniques. Their works undoubtedly fill the leaves of the "bokes" that the eagle has claimed Geoffrey spends most of his free time reading. From Vergil, for example, Chaucer got material for the first book of this work; from Ovid he got material for both books one and three. From Lollius he will get his *Troilus*. Fame then is not simply a phenomenon of sound like Rumor. She is at once an undependable judge and an attractive figure who keeps good and significant company.

Distinctly different from his response earlier in the poem, the persona's reaction to the House of Fame reveals from the first a skeptical understanding of Fame's ambiguous moral value, pursuit of which he ultimately rejects:

I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,  
For no such cause, by my hed!  
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,  
That no wight have my name in honde.  
I wot myself best how y stonde;  
For what I drye, or what I thynke,  
I wil myselven al hyt drynke,  
Certeyn, for the more part,  
As fer forth as I kan myn art.

[1874-82]

We admire the persona's integrity. Having recognized Fame's "feble fundament" (1132), and having witnessed the curious relationship between the nine suits to Fame and her judgment, his rejection shows a refusal to gamble his own reputation on Fame's "condicioun" (1904) or on the fickle "ordre of her dom" (1905).<sup>13</sup> But how does this partially allegorized episode, after which Chaucer names the poem, develop or realize the confusing and fearful issues driving the narrative to this point? Geoffrey himself explicitly asserts no connection between what he thought he was going to learn and what he actually has learned:

The cause why y stonde here:  
 Somme newe tydynges for to lere,  
 Somme newe thinges, y not what,  
 Tydynges, other this or that,  
 Of love, or suche thynges glade.  
 For certeynly, he that me made  
 To comen hyder, seyde me,  
 Y shulde bothe here and se,  
 In this place, wonder thynges;  
 But these be no suche tydynges  
 As I mene of." "Noo?" quod he.  
 And I answered, "Noo, parde!"

[1885-96]

He expected something different from what the eagle intended. So did we. The experience of the House of Fame has refused to answer the questions about truth and verification that the first part of the poem asked. Instead it has answered an assumed question about the value of posterity. The first questions are epistemological, the second is moral.

The episode in the House of Rumor, presumably the last intended segment of the poem, repeats the pattern of revelation and disappointment that was established at the House of Fame. Tracing sound backward toward its source, the persona discovers that tidings (content for his poetry) are compounded of "fals and soth" (2108) even before their image receives a final imprimatur by the nonprincipled Fame. The epistemological implications of this discovery are tendentious: the truth-value in tidings is impossible to ascertain, the lie-value is significant, reputé is unreliable, and representation therefore untrustworthy.

As if to avoid the skeptical conclusion that the experience has been

implying, however, the persona uncharacteristically leaves the sidelines from which he has been observing most of the action. He joins the swirl of rumormongers and energetically tries to play, to learn:

And eke a tydyng for to here,  
That I had herd of som contre  
That shal not now be told for me—  
For hit no nede is, redely;  
Folk kan synge hit bet than I;  
For al mot out, other late or rathe.

[2134–39]

These lines are complexly ambiguous and confusing. The speaker claims to want "to here" a tiding he "had herd," which will not "now" be told "for me." The surface of "for me" denotes that the subject is the recipient of the "not-telling," but the context of the passage requires the subject to be the agent-producer—"Folk kan synge hit bet than I."<sup>14</sup> If the subject is the recipient of the tiding, then the grammatical aspect is confused, unless we separate the poet "I" from the persona "me" because the past perfective indicates an action or event completed in the past. Did the poet hear the tiding before the dream and will the dream not "now" reveal that tiding to the persona? Or, for the sake of avoiding the schizophrenic implications that such a reading implies, should we interpolate the eagle's promise of a tiding during the flight for the tiding itself, so that the past perfective form of the verb can indicate a completed event within the persona's fictional existence? In addition to the problem of the role of the subject and the aspect of the verb, it is not clear whether "of some contre" means "from" or "about" some place. If it means "about" some place, the antecedent of "som" could be the desert where the persona asked the name of the "contree" (475), although there is no place where he could have heard the answer without us also having heard it. Or the antecedent of "som" could be the country of the stars through which the eagle carried the persona at the time he promised a tiding in the future. Moreover, if "of" means "from," then the antecedent of "som" could refer to the meaning implicit in the persona's experience of the Temple of Glass. Although his experience there was visual, his perception of Dido's complaint was aural. Finally "of som contre" could have an extratextual referent in a piece of gossip or news relevant to the audience. The grammatical

ambiguity of these lines does not allow for a single coherent explanation. It does, however, allow us to draw the general conclusion that the tiding will not "now" be forthcoming—"for hit no nede is redely"—with the promise that eventually "al mot out."

Having reached this ambiguously stated nonconclusion functioning as a conclusion, the action turns toward the appearance of the man who seemed "of gret auctorite." New energy arises in the noise of the people running to hear him. But he never speaks. His appearance promises an extension of the narrative but not a conclusion, for what kind of authority could anyone in the House of Rumor claim that would bring the many unresolved elements of this poem to an appropriate end? The experience of the Houses of Fame and Rumor has played a trick on us. We have been led with the persona to seek meaning for the poem or the dream only to encounter frustration every time meaning seems to be indicated. It is as if every step we have taken toward the source of all meaning, from observation through a flight explaining scientifically the nature of sound, from Fame, to Rumor, to a specific authoritative rumor, has not led to the essence of things but rather has led to insubstantiality. Sound and the meaning it supposedly carries becomes finally what the eagle has claimed it is, "noght but eyr ybroken" (765), equivalent to the broken and meaningless air that creates logical and logistical problems in the *Summoner's Tale*.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer has created a complex and ambiguous experience to which his ambivalent persona responds with confusion, fear, skepticism, and finally with accepting disappointment. The poem raises problems about verifiability, credibility, and the value of personal proof, but does not solve them. The persona's anxiety early in the poem about the meaning first of dreams and then of the materials of the past appears to be one cause of the poem's inconclusiveness. The alternately repellent elements of Fame and her attractive relationship with poets appears to be another. The flight, which serves as a spatial transition from one locus to another and from one kind of problem to another, provides interesting information about the persona's studiousness and promises a reward in terms of a tiding. But the reward never comes. Instead a skeptical conclusion begins to surface until the persona grows mysteriously enthusiastic, the text grows confused and



shortly thereafter breaks off, and the relationship between the persona's waking state and his dream never gets worked out.

Irrespective of the state of its ending, the form of the *House of Fame* is at best inconclusive, at worst incoherent, because of the strange interaction between the persona and his experience. The poem raises various subjects about literary craft and about the end of poetic achievement in fame. But the persona's responses to the issues are not sufficiently mediated for the objects of his experience, ambiguous as many of them are, to provide him with understanding and us with a sense that the poet is in control of narrative coherence. Embarrassed by the *House of Fame's* failure to provide coherent meaning, Muscatine claims that it "is most charitably seen as an experiment, wherein the poet's energy and imagination by far outrun his sense of form."<sup>15</sup> Yet the experimental nature that renders the poem's form inconclusive represents its greatest critical fascination.

## II

Despite the completeness of the *Parliament of Fowls*, its form is inconclusive. Chaucer comfortably juxtaposes several contradictory allegations about love and about the tradition of writing love poetry so that they lie contiguously. But he does not resolve the contradictions.<sup>16</sup> The poem ends at the height of its argument, when the parliament of birds has reached a stalemate and Nature has agreed to table the decision for a year. The poet awakens and turns to other books to find "a certeyn thing" (20) that he has not yet found. This is not a conclusion but an indication of future plans based on previous failures. The coexistence of contradictions and the unresolved central argument create inconclusiveness. But unlike the *House of Fame*, which also contains contradictory elements and an unresolved argument, the *Parliament of Fowls* shows Chaucer controlling those elements that make the poem's form inconclusive yet not uncomfortable with the pluralism that the varying claims about love, its subject matter, suggest. In fact, the form of the *Parliament of Fowls* offers inconclusiveness as its own poetic principle. For the first time in Chaucer's poetic career, we find a formal indication of what the poet will do on a much larger scale with contradicting opinions and various genres in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Chaucer's earlier dream visions, where structural confusion contributes to inconclusiveness, the *Parliament of Fowls* is clearly structured. Although there are moments, including the opening stanza of the poem, when the narrator expresses confusion, the poem has a straightforward linear movement. Events, descriptions, and speeches are tersely handled within the rhyme royal stanza.<sup>18</sup> The structure of the poem is more clearly ordered and its parts more equitably deployed than in the *Book of the Duchess* or the *House of Fame*. Yet its form is inconclusive because of the nature of its content (its subject matter) and the persona's inability or refusal either to draw conclusions from his experience or to resolve the set of varying claims about love that his experience suggests.

Compared with the persona of Chaucer's earlier dream visions, the most striking feature about the persona of the *Parliament of Fowls* is that he is relatively uninvolved with the process of both the poem and his dream.<sup>19</sup> Although his confusion about love and his experience in learning about it are the ostensible subjects of the poem, the persona is only involved with action in four specific places: at the beginning where the subject is raised; at the end where it is treated again; and at two transitional points in the plot, the first when he turns from book to bed and dream, and the second when he needs to move from without to within the park. Unlike the persona of the *House of Fame*, who is continually involved with what is happening to him, the persona of the *Parliament of Fowls* comments little on the elements of his experience. He remains aloof from what he is seeing and enters the action only where he has to pass through some line of structural demarcation. To be sure, he repeatedly tells us that he saw one thing or another, as he does in his other dream visions. But there is little sense of musing, of fear, of sympathy for or about what he sees and little moral comment on any of the action. It is as if Chaucer were using the persona, especially in the section of the poem presenting the dream, as a living camera through whose lens we are allowed to see what he sees, but who rarely manipulates our responses by his own interjections, emotions, or amplifications.

One of the reasons for our sense of the persona's aloofness is that he is relatively affectless. The persona is hardly felt as a significant actor in his reading or in his dream experience, as he was in the readings and

dreams of his earlier poems. The experience of the dream, when it occurs, has the same quality of paraphrase that the retelling of Macrobius's book has in the early part of the poem. The persona's lack of involvement with his dream accounts for the more tranquil manner of this poem when compared with either the *Book of the Duchess* or the *House of Fame*, and for the lack of intensity felt in most of its form. Yet, even though the persona's aloofness makes the poem's mood different from the mood of the other dream visions, those four points in the narrative where he intrudes contribute to the poem's inconclusiveness, for they provide that same sense of ambivalence and naïvely limited understanding that the persona provided to the other dream visions.

The first appearance of the persona is, of course, at the opening, where we are given a complicated definition and the persona's confused response to it:

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
Th'assay so hard, so sharp the conquyng,  
The dredful joye, alwey that slit so yerne;  
Al this mene I by Love, that my felynge  
Astonyeth with his wonderful werkynge  
So sore, iwis, that whan I on hym thynke,  
Nat wot I wel wher that I flete or synke.

[1-7]

The *sententia* of the first line is common enough—related to the classical "ars longa, vita brevis"—but its application is not clearly pointed and its syntactic references are complicated, as if purposely to complicate its meaning.<sup>20</sup> We are led to consider first that the speaker is talking about life and craft, both of which require a "sharp" conquering, both of which may be characterized by the oxymoronic "dredful joye" because the pleasure of both presumably slides away so easily. At line four of the stanza, however, we are told that what came before it did not actually refer to life and to craft, but that life and craft and their attendant anxieties refer to love. It is finally love that causes the persona's astonishment. The complexity of this opening makes the persona insecure; he does not know whether he is floating or sinking. The syntax of the opening lines is so ambiguous that readers encountering them for the first time frequently wonder whether the persona is

commenting on life, on art, on love, or on all three.<sup>21</sup> The three terms function in paratactic balance without subordination so that they appear synonymous. The persona tells us, however, that by art and craft, with their anxieties, he means love. But if "al this" means love, then the love he has in mind is a concept more encompassing than ours. It is apparently capable of including within its definition lived experience and human activity such as writing about lived experience; it represents the foundation upon which human life and human action ultimately rest.

The persona's broad definition of what he means by love should contain some core of certainty upon which the various elements of love within the poem will rest. But it does not because the persona, having created an ambiguous definition, does not understand it. The stanzas that follow the opening present someone who, like the persona of the *House of Fame*, is so overwhelmed by the breadth of the definition that he denies knowing "Love in dede" (8); so he dedicates himself to learning about it from books that will disclose or test the validity of the definition. He tells us "out of olde bokes, in good feyth, / cometh al this newe science that men lere" (24-25). But, whereas the book he turns to reveals to him a metaphysical end of human life and of human action, it does not reveal to him "a certeyn thing," which he apparently hopes will help him through his confusion.<sup>22</sup>

The persona's contribution to the inconclusiveness of the form of the *Parliament of Fowls* resides precisely in the distinction I have been making between the breadth and complexity of definitions about love and the limiting narrowness of his search for a certain answer that will satisfy his curiosity and help his career as a writer of love poetry. Whenever the persona enters the action of the poem, he responds to his experience with ambivalence or disappointment. After he paraphrases the contents of Macrobius's book, which describes a greater metaphysical end to love than he apparently can use in his search, he comments with disappointment:

For bothe I hadde thyng which that I nolde,  
And ek I nadde that thyng that I wolde.

[90-91]

When confronted by the contradictory sign above the entrance to the

park of his dream, he is immobilized—"Right as, betwixen adamauntes two / of evene myght" (148-49)—and he needs to be shoved forward by his guide. The fearful reaction to the sign seems caused less by the danger that the warning suggests than by the contradiction itself, which claims polar opposites to be true of the same experience. Were it merely fear, the persona would undoubtedly flee. His immobilization suggests his fear that experience within the gates will be complicated, a totality created by a balance of opposites. Complication is not what the persona wants to encounter in his search for that "certeyn thing." Finally, after experiencing the phenomenon of the parliament of the birds, the awakened persona's final response, which brings the poem to its unconcluded end, is again one of disappointment, as if his dream experience had left him in the same state of confusion with respect to finding out that thing as his reading of Macrobius:

I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,  
To reede upon, and yit I rede alwey.  
I hope, ywis, to rede so some day  
That I shal mete some thyng for to fare  
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare.

[695-99]

He dedicates himself to continuing to search because he has not found the answer—one presumably about love, life, and craft—in either book or dream.

It is not only the persona's narrowly aimed search and his disappointment, however, that make the *Parliament of Fowls* inconclusive. Other elements of the poem as well contribute to the inconclusiveness of its form: the definition of love, the relation between the subject of Macrobius's book and the dream, the elements both abstract and concrete within the park as well as their relation to the sign over the entrance, and, of course, the parliament of birds and its conclusion, or lack of it. But, as we look at these elements, we shall see that inconclusiveness is so much a part of Chaucer's conception in his poem, so much based on what may be called a pluralistic vision of reality, that their sum total does not constitute a narrative form made incoherent by its inconclusiveness. Rather, it suggests that an inconclusive form can be successful.

Like the curious opening stanza with its shifting expectations of subject, the content of the larger structural units of the *Parliament of Fowls* creates expectations for one kind of meaning only to undercut them with new content implying another kind of meaning. For example, the unit of the poem concerned with the paraphrase of Macrobius leads us to expect a dream connected in some way with what has been read. In the *Book of the Duchess*, the persona's reading of Ceyx and Alcyone ultimately had something in common with the greater purpose of the dream that followed. But the dream in the *Parliament of Fowls* is not only unclearly connected to the reading of Macrobius (except in the appropriation of Affricanus as the guide into the dream park) but the persona's disappointed response to his reading makes us wonder why the paraphrase was there at all, what contrastive feature the upcoming dream might have. Neither a comparative nor a contrastive connection is ever implied or drawn. In fact, once the persona has passed into the dream park and Affricanus has disappeared from the action, Macrobius's book is all but forgotten. Although we might choose ultimately to interpret the bird parliament as an ironic working out of Affricanus's assertion that the virtuous man must look to the common profit, the interpretation seems more strongly motivated by our modern need to find a thematic or structural unity in poetry than it is based on what connections the poem itself suggests. Bennett is, I think, correct in asserting of the scenes in the dream that

we cannot establish more than an antithetical and oblique relation between them and African's discourse in the Proem. There the emphasis is on immaterial joys of heaven, here on joys and sorrows of a very material earth. Scipio's dream is chiefly concerned with Eternity and the Life of spirit; Chaucer's with Nature and the impulses of the flesh.<sup>23</sup>

I would argue, however, that the very obliquity and antithetical quality of relation between Chaucer's dream and Scipio's does serve a function, although the function does not suggest unity.<sup>24</sup> Rather, it serves to support the persona's disappointment with whatever he has learned from his reading and to undermine or question the particular validity of the authority that Macrobius's book and its doctrine represent. In light of the personal experience of the persona's dream, Affricanus's

teaching to Scipio appears to be not a conclusive enough monition to be valid for everyone.

The inconclusiveness created by the contrastive nature of the two dreams in the poem also manifests itself throughout the different units of the dream. For example, on either side of the gate to the dream park are contradictory oppositions that immobilize the persona because each one appears as an assertion of truth. Once inside the park, however, the persona describes only one of the sign's statements, namely "that blyssful place / of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure" (127-28). In fact, what the persona sees in the park openly contradicts the warning written on the dark side of the gate. Whereas the assertions in black had stated "ther nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere" (137), the persona sees a park in which "were treës clad with leves that ay shal laste" (173), a park in which there is a garden "of blosmy bowes . . . with floures white, blewe, yelwe, and rede" (183-86). Whereas the gate had read "This strem yow ledeth to the sorweful were / there as the fish in prysoun is al drye" (138-39), the persona sees

. . . colde welle-stremes, nothyng dede,  
That swymmen ful of smale fishes lighte,  
With fynnes rede and skales sylver bryghte.

[187-89]

Whereas the gate had threatened to lead "unto the mortal strokes of the spere / of which Disdayn and Daunger is the gyde" (135-36), the path in fact leads to a temple of brass about which are dancing women and before which are regaled the pleasing and familiar personifications of courtly allegory: "Pleasaunce," "Curteysie," "Gentilesse," as well as some less familiar but no less pleasant figures like "Dame Pees" and "Dame Pacience." It is true that the catalogue of courtly personifications contains what seems one less than pleasant figure:

And of the Craft that can and hath the myght  
To don by force a wyght to done folye—  
Disfigurat was she, I nyl nat lye.

[220-22]

But this is the only truly unpleasant personification in the park, and the persona's response to its disfigured aspect—"I nyl nat lye"—somehow makes it appear less egregious because it is recognized as different

from, but acceptable within, the list of other pleasant personifications.<sup>25</sup> It is also true that there are some unpleasant aspects suggested about love within the temple itself. But these unpleasantnesses are represented at a considerable remove, for they are perceived not as existing within the park but as being symbolically depicted on the wall in the form of a story or a catalogue.<sup>26</sup> The persona's initial response to what he experiences in the park—"But, Lord, so I was glad and well begoon!" (171)—never changes throughout his description of whatever he sees there. In consequence the reader soon forgets the dark warning on the one side of the gate. Or, if one does not forget it, one recognizes that the authoritative, though contradictory, quality of conclusiveness of the statement itself has been undercut by the action following it. It is as if Chaucer were suggesting a conclusive sounding *sententia* in order purposefully to undercut it or to question its conclusiveness by his descriptive technique.

Not, however, until we reach the main or central issue of the poem—the bird parliament—do we recognize clearly why Chaucer has been undermining the conclusive *sententiae* that the elements of his poem have been asserting. Here the technique of undercutting expectation is not simply a device to test the conclusiveness of authority; it is part of the poet's conception, whereby created inconclusiveness can suggest, and even validate, a pluralistic vision of reality.

The section begins with Nature explaining the customary procedure of bringing together on Saint Valentine's day all species of birds to choose their mates. It is expected that the choosing will be carried out in traditional medieval fashion, with the birds of highest order beginning and the birds of lower orders following according to an understood qualitative hierarchy of bird society. The problem, however, arises when, after the "tersel egle" makes his choice, another tersel "of lower kynde" lays claim to the same mate, whereupon a third tersel objects and lays yet another claim to her. The unexpected contention not only lasts "tyl downward drow the sonne wonder faste" (490); it makes the other birds impatient because the arguments do not convince the group which of the three the female ought to accept. They are "withouten any preve" (497). The implication of their objection is that the kind of courtly rhetoric which expresses the suit of each of the three eagles has interfered with the process of Nature, a process she has



established as the reasonable method for choice of a mate. Moreover, their argument has interfered with the selection by birds of lower order who also have rightful claims to relevant choices of their own. The parliament that follows, in which Nature ordains each order of bird to have a say in the matter, begins with a direct response to the question before them all, namely, how to choose the most worthy of the three suitors; but it soon moves wide of the issue and becomes a parliament in which each class of bird speaks in general to the issue of love and mating, and reveals a spectrum of opinion on the subject. The point of the argument is that wherever there is a disparate group, there will be disparate opinions with respect to any issue. Furthermore, each of the disparate opinions, whether more or less noble, has about it a political validity that makes unanimous consensus impossible and even obscures the question at issue.

Chaucer never leads his readers to any conclusion about which claim is more just or more important. To be sure, his stylistic parody of each class of birds suggests absurdity in the claims of certain classes, like that represented by the goose. But it criticizes as well the claims and the method of making claims of the courtly class. The opinions of all classes are opened to scrutiny, but we are never urged to accept the claims of one class as more valid than the claims of another. Rather, Chaucer directs our attention to the fact of pluralistic opinion. True, the speaker for the birds of ravine suggests that the choice should be made according to which of the three suitors is "the worthieste / of knyghthod . . . most of estat, of blod the gentilleste" (548-55); true, too, the opportunistic argument of the goose is made to seem ridiculous because it is so ignoble. If nobility were at issue, then we could easily discover which class of birds had the best argument. Nobility is not, however, the issue. The issue is rather opinion itself, and what claims the opinions of different species of birds reveal. The spectrum of birds displays a spectrum of bird opinion about love, each of which appears valid and appropriate for the class of bird opining it, whether it be the sentimental idealism of the turtledove or the practical sense of choice represented by the duck. Nature's final decision to leave the choice of mate up to the female eagle suggests that Chaucer is offering individual choice in love as the only viable alternative to a selection process where opinion is valid. By doing this, he is also leaving the subject of love,

about which the entire poem is concerned, up to individual choice, implying that there is no one authoritative definition or attitude that holds true at all times or in all places. Authority, in fact, is here being undermined by an implication that individual opinion has its own validity.

Even the attitude of the figure Nature supports the pluralism that the spectrum of bird opinion suggests.<sup>27</sup> While Nature functions throughout the parliament as leader, as mediator, and as customary agent appointed by God to see His plan carried out, she separates her allegorical quality from the quality of Reason, who presided over all the judgments of Nature since at least the time of Alanus de Insulis's *Anticlaudianus*. In the *Parliament of Fowls*, Nature comports herself in accordance with Reason; she even recognizes that the advice of the birds of ravine is the most reasonable. But she also recognizes that on the question of love she is different from Reason:

If I were Resoun, certes, thanne wolde I  
Conseyle yow the royal tercel take,  
As seyde the tercelet ful skyfully,  
As for the gentilleste and most worthi.

[632-35]

Hers is the traditional, reasonable counseling, the counseling that would look to nobility and to rank when making a decision for a mate.<sup>28</sup> But Nature accepts the request of the female eagle who says:

I wol nat serve Venus ne Cupide,  
Forsothe as yit, by no manere weye.

[652-53]

She accepts the eagle's request for a year's respite "to have my choys al fre" (649). The poem makes clear, then, that the argument which concerns the parliament cannot be settled because in matters of love Nature and Reason are different and, by implication, in matters of the heart the authority of Reason no longer holds total sway over the claim of varying individual or, at least, class opinions.

The *Parliament of Fowls* ends on this purposely inconclusive note. After the "roundel" (actually a *triolet*), which the birds sing to Nature, Saint Valentine, and Summer, the persona awakens and tells us emphatically that he has not found the answer he has been looking for.

Despite the inconclusiveness of the form of the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, there is no sense of an incoherence of meaning, as there was in the *House of Fame*. Rather, the poem's form is satisfying, completely realized, and convincing because its parts were conceived to function in an indeterminate way and to suggest an indeterminacy of meaning. Inconclusiveness has been useful to this form whose interest has been to articulate the possibility of a valid pluralism. Chaucer will create such an inconclusive form again, though without the allegorical paraphernalia. The *Canterbury Tales* may be seen as a more complex working out of the principle of inconclusiveness the end of which suggests a pluralistic vision of reality as valid.

Before examining how Chaucer creates this inconclusive narrative form on a far vaster scale than in the *Parliament of Fowls*, however, we must first look at the other main line of narrative development in Chaucer's career, the line that concerns the persona, turned narrator, at work on objective, legendary narration as opposed to subjective dream vision experience, for it too teaches Chaucer how to control narrative development, so important an element of each of the tales within the *Canterbury Tales*. In the next chapter, I shall examine what problems the poet confronted and mastered in his rendering of legendary materials, as they most fully may be witnessed in *Troilus*.



#### IV. "Of Storial Thing": *Anelida and Arcite* and *Troilus and Criseyde*



Chaucer continued to be fascinated by dreams and their relation to truth, and to write dream visions until late in his career. He continued to develop his poetic technique of representing experience through a first-person narrator, and, as we shall see, he used the form of the dream vision abstractly to fashion the outer form of the

*Canterbury Tales*. But the dream vision represents only one major narrative kind that occupied him throughout his career. More than half of the bulk of his work is comprised of third-person narratives that, after him, I am calling "storial."<sup>1</sup> Whether these narratives come from his own mouth, as in *Troilus and Criseyde*, or from the mouths of characters whom he invents to tell them, as in the *Canterbury Tales*, their forms and their power derive only partially from Chaucer's literary interest in how to express personal experience. They derive as well from his interest in how to translate and indite materials from "olde bokes." It is the purpose of this chapter to explore some ways by which Chaucer fashions earlier, not necessarily inconclusive, works by others into narrative forms whose conclusiveness is as problematical as those of his dream visions. As with my argument about Chaucer's dream visions, my purpose here is to show how Chaucer created from traditional literary forms an inconclusive kind of narrative literature.

*Anelida and Arcite* and *Troilus and Criseyde* are two early examples of Chaucer's storial narratives. Each is different in genre and form, yet each exemplifies how the narrator creates peculiar effects that ultimately render his storial materials inconclusive. Let us examine first *Anelida*, not the best of Chaucer's works, to see the nature of inconclusiveness in its form; we shall then be able to confront *Troilus*, perhaps the best of Chaucer's works, to see the immensely more complicated ways in which the poet creates inconclusiveness from a source that is originally conclusive.

The abortive *Anelida* is so brief that its inconclusiveness seems caused more by its fragmentary state than by the conception and rendering of its form. Yet, strictly speaking, even the fragment that Chaucer left us is formally inconclusive, since it breaks off at a point where it has not accomplished anything like what it alleges it will do at the beginning. For all its claim to be a "noble storie" (13), requiring epic invocation to Mars, *Anelida* is actually an ignoble story about an abandoned woman, whose stylized complaint occupies the bulk of its lines. In this sense the fragment is not unlike the fragment known as the *Squire's Tale*, which also promises to do many things, but does something different in its short space.<sup>2</sup> It may be argued, however, that the *Squire's Tale* is ironically intended, that in it Chaucer is working to demonstrate a young man's inability to organize, order, and deploy poetic materials appropriately and that he wants to suggest by the story the Squire's immature artistry in the face of good intentions or high pretensions. *Anelida*, on the other hand, cannot receive so charitable an interpretation since the narrator who tells the story is Chaucer himself and since the work does not suggest an ironic intention.

Yet, *Anelida* is not without its felicities, mostly found in the non-narrative portion of the poem. The complaint, which imitates in strophic stanzas French models of the *compleynte d'amour*, is actually a remarkable tour de force. In fact, the sure hand with which Chaucer creates, orders, and rhymes *Anelida's* complaint makes the awkwardness of the narration that precedes it seem more egregious. After the epic invocation and a beginning of action, there is no development of plot. We move from mention of Theseus, Ipolita, and Emilye to Thebes and to the catastrophe after the war of the Seven against Thebes; we then settle on *Anelida*, the "quene of Ermony" (71-72), who is outstanding both for her beauty and her "stidfastness." The narrator then introduces us to Arcite the Theban knight (85) and two lines later tells us that "he was double in love and no thing pleyn (87)." The narrator neither tells the story that has caused this evaluation nor depicts a developing relationship between the two main characters. Instead, he pitches the narrative forward to the complaint, suggesting by the procedure that the narrative materials and the questions they raise are insignificant paraphernalia used simply to prepare for the lyrical portion.

In the woodenness of its narrative structure, *Anelida* resembles some of the tales of the later *Legend of Good Women*. But in its form—at least in the form of the fragment we have—the poem resembles the *Book of the Duchess*, in which the narrative leads up to (and away from) an elaborately rhetorical set piece like a complaint. Moreover, its compositional method is also like that of the *Book of the Duchess* in the way Chaucer uses one source to begin, echoes others as he proceeds, but mostly depends on his own invention and imagination. To be sure, the narrator of the poem claims specific authority, which establishes the venerable, storial nature of the piece. He tells us, in fact, the story is so venerable that most of us have forgotten it entirely:

That elde, which that al can frete and bite,  
As hit hath freten mony a noble storie,  
Hath nygh devoured out of oure memorie.

[12-14]

This striking image of age as a voracious beast devouring stories recalls the instability of literary materials suggested by the melting names at the foundation of Fame's house. Here, however, the narrator is intent on doing something about it. He wants to rescue the story from oblivion, to claim for his own time its significant meaning, and to preserve it for posterity.<sup>3</sup> To do this, he names Statius and Corinna as his authorities, uses epic invocation to elevate the style, and quotes Statius directly as an epigraph.<sup>4</sup> Yet, only the beginning derives from Statius, actually from Statius by way of Boccaccio's *Teseida*.<sup>5</sup> The remainder of the narrative portion sometimes echoes Statius, sometimes Boccaccio, sometimes Dante and Ovid; the lyrical portion, *Anelida's* complaint, has no specific authority, except in its Ovidian mood. Like Chaucer's earlier dream visions, which echo and translate Froissart, Dante, and Alanus de Insulis, among others, *Anelida*, for all its suggestion of being a different kind of narrative form, a storial narrative, uses the dream vision as its model.

One difference between *Anelida* and a dream vision like the *Book of the Duchess*, however, is that whereas the *Book of the Duchess* is successfully realized, *Anelida* is not. The reason lies, I believe, in the nature of the modes in which Chaucer casts each poem. The *Book of the Duchess* is a dream vision, using subjective experience for its narrative;

*Anelida*, on the other hand, begins with an epic, storial format but moves so quickly away from its storial beginning to the complaint that its form appears more like a dream vision and less like a storial narrative. The action seems primarily intended for the lyrical set piece. One reason why Chaucer may have abandoned the piece is that the work's form does not accommodate comfortably or subordinate appropriately the elements of epic and of dream vision that coexist within it.<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, the possibility that the parts may ultimately have cohered in proper subordination when the work was finished.<sup>7</sup> But that is unlikely, for the problem with the portion we have is not so much one of coherence, as in the *House of Fame*, but one of incongruity or lack of intelligible sequence in the elements of its form.

Chaucer returned to the materials of *Anelida* when he "made" the book of Palamon and Arcite, which became the *Knight's Tale* in the *Canterbury Tales*. The *Knight's Tale* has no trouble accommodating into its epic form the long rhetorical complaints, like those by Arcite in Thebes and Palamon in prison. In fact, the lyrical intensity of the complaints seems as appropriate to the otherwise leisurely pacing of the narrative as do Theseus' two speeches about the nature of love, and even more in keeping with the expectations of the form than the Knight's lengthy refusal to narrate Arcite's funeral. The complaint in *Anelida*, by contrast, overwhelms the narrative portion that precedes it, making the narrative appear to exist expressly for the purpose of the love complaint. The subheading of *Anelida*—The Complaynt of feire Anelida and fals Arcite—suggests, however, that the poem should not be taken as an epic narrative, despite its opening, but as a set of complaints, the one by Anelida, the other by Arcite, held together by a narrative filigree. As such, the form of *Anelida* resembles the form of the *Broche of Thebes* (the complaints of Mars and Venus), in which a narrative filigree binds together the elaborate complaints of the two planet-deities.<sup>8</sup> The elaborate astrological references that constitute much of the narrative of the *Broche of Thebes* keep that piece squarely in the tradition of allegorical dream visions, or at least in the tradition of the love-complaint; hence its form is successfully realized.<sup>9</sup> This is not true for *Anelida*, however, because the genre in which it is conceived is



not clear. On the one hand, we expect from the subtitle a complaint, commonly cast in the form of dream visions. On the other, we expect from the invocation to Mars, to Pallas, and to the Muses on "Parnasso" an epic, an expectation sustained by three hexameters from Statius that the narrator quotes at the beginning of the story, and by the narrator's storial intention in the invocation:

For hit ful depe is sonken in my mynde,  
With pitous hert in Englyssh to endyte  
This olde storie, in Latyn which I fynde,  
Of quene Anelida and fals Arcite.

[8-11]

Although the sad mood of the passage sustains our expectation of a complaint form, the intention to render into English an "olde storie" found in Latin suggests another form.

We do not have enough of *Anelida* to tell us whether, and in what ways, the inconclusiveness of the poem's form derives from its mixture of genres and of narrative modes, from the way its narrator uses authority and sources, or from its fragmentary state. The inconclusiveness of the poem's form may derive from all of these, or inconclusiveness may simply be a narrative condition of all of Chaucer's poetry because of his compositional method. Let us therefore turn to *Troilus*, Chaucer's longest and most complex storial narrative, a complete poem with a beginning, middle, and end, a work identified generically as a tragedy, whose plot derives from one primary source, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. By examining *Troilus*, we shall be able to understand more completely than we can from *Anelida* the relationship of Chaucerian inconclusiveness to generic choice and how, and in what ways, the nature of the narrator who is rendering the storial narrative from his source ultimately contributes to the inconclusiveness of the new work's form, despite the conclusiveness of the plot in the original source. I shall examine the ways in which the narrator's rendering of Boccaccio's conclusive plot, and his involvement with the characters of that plot, create a narrative form whose conclusiveness is problematic. Finally, I shall discuss both the genre and the ending of *Troilus* to show how Chaucer's alterations reinforce the inconclusiveness of the form by undercutting our tragic expectations.

## II

The plot of Chaucer's *Troilus* is conclusive. The events work themselves out in the fashion expected from the very first action of the story, Calchas's betrayal. The dedication at the end subjects the poem first to "alle poesie," namely, to the writers in the epic tradition, then to "moral Gower" and "philosophical Strode," both of whom, whatever their personal involvement with the poem's creation, the adjectives preceding their names characterize as appropriate to its concerns. Yet, despite the conclusiveness of the plot and the appropriateness of the dedications, there is a sense of inconclusiveness in the form of *Troilus* not related to the plot and its concerns but to the narrator rendering the plot.

It is easy to recognize in the narrator of *Troilus* a character consistent with the persona who told his experiences in the dream visions. Although this character appears more sober, he is no more earnest than the persona of the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*. The self-portrait of Chaucer in the second book of the *House of Fame*—the studious, serious, almost cloistered academic-by-night, not the frightened actor in that poem—seems to represent the sense of character Chaucer wanted his narrator to possess in *Troilus*. The simplistic naïveté of the persona of the *Book of the Duchess* is overwhelmed in the *House of Fame* by the complexities that his studiousness has produced. The result is a more sober character who appears as the persona of the *Parliament of Fowls* and the narrator of *Troilus*. But by the time of *Troilus*, the objects of the narrator's interests have altered somewhat. Whereas previously the persona was filled with wonder about his experiences, whereas he suffered and was frightened by the implications of his dreams because they taught him a skepticism that he apparently feared, the narrator of *Troilus* is no longer a seeker after answers to theoretical questions. Rather, he has become a translator of other people's works. In the earlier poems, he wondered about many general things; now he has a purpose, an intention to render a historical aspect of the matter of Troy. The student of personal dreams and of poetic experiences has given way to the maker in English of other people's stories. It is as if the younger man has matured into a professional being, not an unlikely change if the persona is at all modeled upon the real Chaucer.<sup>10</sup>

Similar as are Chaucer the narrator of *Troilus* and Chaucer the persona of the dream visions, they differ in their function to the form and in their relationship to the content. In a dream vision, a persona tells of his own experiences in a situation. The narrator of a storial work, however, most often describes a situation that is not his own. A dream vision persona by nature is more intimate, more involved with his telling, whereas a storial narrator tends to be more aloof because he is telling someone else's story. But in *Troilus* something curious happens. Although we expect the narrator to remain aloof from the story, we discover that he gets frequently and intensely involved with his fiction, appearing at once as a narrator of someone else's story and as a persona in the experience of his own poem. This narrator, then, has two functions: he is the historian of someone else's plot, responsible to his author to get it right, and an actor in the experience of rendering that plot, drawn for his own reasons to alter the effect of the plot on us. These two functions are not always integrated, and at times they create a tension in the poem's form that undercuts the authority that the story's author, the fictional Lollius, originally gave it and causes ambiguity in the meaning of the work. The result of this tension is inconclusiveness in the poem's form. Let us look at this complicated use of the narrator in *Troilus* to see how it creates an inconclusive form in a narrative whose plot is otherwise conclusive.

Morton Bloomfield has argued that the narrator of *Troilus* evokes and controls "distance" in the poem, an aloofness from the materials of his source that separates us from the plot in "temporal, spatial, aesthetic and religious ways."<sup>11</sup> The narrator's formal concerns in the poems repeatedly distance us from the inner events of the plot and "make us more aware of Chaucer the narrator than ordinarily."<sup>12</sup> By contrast, but to our same ultimate awareness of the narrator's centrality, the actor in the experience of rendering this plot collapses the distance by calling attention to his own sympathies for the characters and their activities. For example, the narrator renders Troilus's love behavior in book one ironically, thereby controlling the impatience we would otherwise feel at the hero's self-indulgence. Yet his feelings about the value of such love and his sympathy for his hero's suffering make us feel the poignancy of Troilus's pain more intensely and cause us to identify with him even while we feel the irony and distance that it creates. Speaking of style, Muscatine, after Bethel, calls this effect one of "multi-

consciousness, the simultaneous awareness of different and opposite planes of reality."<sup>13</sup>

The double role of the narrator, as historian and as involved actor, affects the presentation of Criseyde even more complexly than it does the presentation of Troilus. On the one hand, the narrator's warnings of Criseyde's falseness and its effects, and his apparently heavy dependence on his presumed source, especially in the fourth and fifth books of the poem, distance us from her actions by preparing us for them. On the other hand, his emotional response to her and his view of her as a "hevenyssh perfit creature" (1.104), as well as his repeated attempts to avoid confronting the moral conclusions he must necessarily draw from her actions, break down the distance between us and her and make us feel more intensely about her. Distinguishing between Chaucer the narrator and Chaucer the poet—not between Chaucer the historian and Chaucer the actor, as I have been—Donaldson describes the complicated effect of this double mediation on our responses to Criseyde:

At some of the moments when his narrator is striving most laboriously to palliate Criseide's behavior, Chaucer, standing behind him, jogs his elbow, causing him to fall into verbal imprecision, or into anticlimax, or making it redundant—generally doing these things in such a way that the reader will be encouraged almost insensibly to see Criseide in a light quite different from the one that the narrator is so earnestly trying to place her in.<sup>14</sup>

This double role for the narrator causes an affective inconclusiveness in the perceived form of the work. It blurs issues, confuses reader response, and makes ambiguous the fictive reality of the poem. It also interferes with our responses to the events of the plot by making us so aware of Chaucer the narrator as the teller of the tale that we cannot read this poem simply as a story, as we would other storied narratives like romances. We are forced to read it as a subjective narrative, a story being told by a character whose consciousness and even unconsciousness mediate and control the effect, the significance, even the truth contained within the form.

In the dream vision poems, we have often been aware of the complicated persona. In fact, we have frequently been as aware of him as we have been of the objects of his experience. But in those works, we

do not find anything particularly unusual about this awareness, for, after all, the experiences of the poem are the persona's and he is the subject. *Troilus*, by contrast, is storial in its mode; Troilus and his "double sorwe" are both the subject and the experience to which we are invited to attend. Thus the narrator's intense involvement in *Troilus* seems peculiar.

Narrators mediate our experience of the text. In the narrative literature preceding Chaucer, the narrative voice of a Chrétien de Troyes or of a Wolfram von Eschenbach is clearly heard and strongly felt, but it does not generally interfere with the workings of the fiction to the extent that Chaucer's voice does. Generally, the narrative voice leads us into the fiction and moves us from episode to episode or from book to book when the work is an extended one. Frequently, it tells us what to feel—pity for a lover's pain, fear for a hero's life, and so on. The narrator uses his power to chasten or reassure us morally as well as to criticize others for not telling the story properly.<sup>15</sup> But the narrator of *Troilus* manipulates us in two directions. He creates distance from his text by telling us of its ending, by separating us in time from it, by philosophizing action; and he abridges distance by identifying with the action, by making the judgments as if he were a part of, or close to, the action, and by psychologizing action. More important, the narrator of *Troilus* manipulates us not so much by telling us what to feel or where to turn our attention but rather by telling us how he feels or where he is taking us. It is as if Chaucer is mediating the history he derives from his stated source Lollius through a character whose consciousness is as central to our total sense of the poem's form as is the plot.

Bloomfield tells us that "the Chaucerian sense of distance and aloofness is the artistic correlative of the concept of predestination."<sup>16</sup> I have already argued that the sense of distance in *Troilus* is not simply one of aloofness but of a sliding scale, now aloof, now close, now moving away from the plot, now closing space between the plot and our experience, always asserting the narrator's consciousness as the sieve through which the plot must be pressed. In context of Bloomfield's argument, I take "predestination" to mean the necessity that God knows by virtue of His ability to see all time and all action in one point. Just as the reader must accept the events of *Troilus* through the narrator's point of view and with his insistence on the end, and just as Lady Philosophy would

argue to Boethius, and a theologian to us, that we must accept the meaning and end of our being through an awareness of God's vision, which is different from our own, so we must accept the events and the end of any fiction through the consciousness of any narrator who, no matter what his relation to the author, claims to be the maker of the fiction. In this way the sense of distance that a narrator establishes between us and the events of his text provides an artistic correlative to determinacy of life, or of plot. The narrator, like God, can be omniscient. But when the narrator gets involved with his fiction, as does the narrator of *Troilus*, or as do many of the pilgrims who tell tales on their way to Canterbury, the form becomes inconclusive because the narrator's particular psychology qualifies a total awareness of reality and places greater emotional weight on certain elements of the story than would be expected from a truly omniscient being like God. Such a narrator becomes, thus, a character different from the author in that he is finite and perceives finitely. In *Troilus* the narrator is a character who has grown familiar to us from earlier works; he is a lover *manqué*, a curious and skeptical scholar, a historian with a kind of frightened interest in philosophical questions about love, about necessity, about the ends of poetry. This character is limited by the particulars of his own psychology, by his fears, his skepticism, his sympathies.

Chaucer could have developed as a poet in any number of ways and with any number of interests. From the first, however, his chief interest in literary representation was psychology, and his chief responses to the issues that his personae encountered were psychologistic. Whereas Aristotle insists on the primacy of action over character, Chaucer, who did not know the *Poetics*, emphasizes from the beginning character and psychology (Aristotle's "Thought") over action.<sup>17</sup> The dream vision as a narrative form in which Chaucer chose originally to write his narratives never required a sense of plausible plot. The form of dreams is by nature determined by psychological need and association, not by plausible consequences to people's activities. When we consider Chaucer's early works, we think not of their plots, for the journeys the persona undertakes hardly cohere as plots. We think of these works as narrative experiences not so much of what happened but of who or what was encountered, like the Black Knight, the eagle,

Fama, Affricanus, Lady Nature, a goose, a turtledove, a duck, a whelp. Most of all, we recall the consciousness of the character named Geffrey, whose dream experiences Chaucer narrated.

In *Troilus*, where plot is a significant factor and where events create the tragedy of the story, we might expect an emphasis on action over character. Thus Muscatine argues that in this poem "characterization is a device, not an end."<sup>18</sup> Yet, aside from the first action of Calchas' betrayal, which is necessary to begin the story, the opinions and feelings of the characters in the poem appear more significant than the action of the plot.<sup>19</sup> For all its discussion of fortune and its relation to human action, for all its consideration of the actions of the war between Troy and the Greeks, *Troilus* is a tragedy of character.<sup>20</sup> Not only is the narrator the central consciousness in control of audience response, the characters and their feelings within the plot occupy our concern more significantly than the plot itself. Charles Owen puts the matter thus:

The action in the poem is determined in large measure by the character of the actors. *Troilus* may be struck suddenly by love, but his response to the situation is an expression of his character. Throughout the poem we watch men and women moving and thinking and feeling. Frequently they are victims of their own self-deception. But their actions emerge; they are not imposed.<sup>21</sup>

The abuse that love creates in *Troilus* in book one, the satisfaction that he finds in book three, and the disabuse that he receives in book five are of a piece and belong to the category of character rather than of action. *Troilus*'s psychology motivates his behavior. Although *Troilus*'s disillusionment finally results from his perception of Criseyde's action of giving Diomedes his brooch, the action is made known to *Troilus* beforehand in a dream and his responses proceed from his psychology.

In another way, Criseyde's interior monologue in book two (701-812) is ultimately as significant as any action she subsequently performs, for her psychology, which is revealed there, motivates her subsequent actions. It even functions as an action, for its length and development represent Chaucer's way of convincing us through narration of inner thought that Criseyde's love for *Troilus* was not a "sodeyn

love" (2. 667), as opposed later to Diomedes's (5. 1024). In fact, in Criseyde's case, action seems to function as a revelation of character, rather than the other way around.

The first thing we learn of Criseyde, even before we meet Troilus, is that she takes personally her father's treason—she was "in gret penaunce" (1. 94). Her first conclusion about her father's action reveals immediately the intense ambivalence that motivates her character throughout: She "nyste what was best to rede" (1. 96). The first look she casts at Troilus in the temple, which causes him to be struck down by Love's arrow, reveals the psychological complexity with which Chaucer imbues her from the beginning:

To Troilus right wonder wel with alle  
 Gan for to like hire mevyng and hire chere,  
 Which somdel deignous was, for she let falle  
 Hir look a lite aside in swich manere,  
 Ascaunces, "What! may I nat stonden here?"  
 And after that hir lokyng gan she lighte.

[1. 288-93]

Although Criseyde's look is "somdel deignous," it is caused by the way she drops her eyes and from the corner of them seems to ask an ambiguous question. Is the question a challenge, or is it a fearful response to her sense that as the daughter of Calchas she might be out of place in the temple and its society? Finally, the lightening of her look dissolves the tension of what the side-glance suggests and appears flirtatious, as if to undo both the challenge and the fear. This response to a situation reveals a woman who is both proud and afraid, who is uncomfortable in a situation and who handles the situation with a look that defends her in her discomfort, yet conceals the discomfort in a stereotypically feminine way. The look is above all one of a woman who is insecure. All subsequent action that Criseyde performs or to which she allows herself to be subject may be explained by what can be interpreted from this look, although the gullible narrator and the many male critics who follow the narrator in their affection for her fail to recognize in their responses their own susceptibilities to an insecure woman in a difficult plight. This is not to say that critics should not be interested in Criseyde. Chaucer was himself so interested in the complexities of her psychology and their relation to her actions that he



considerably altered Boccaccio's less complex Criseida by psychologizing the actions of his heroine. Whereas her actions cannot be defended morally, they are psychologically explicable, and the narrator's interest in the psychological explanation of her character continually preempts his interest in, and evaluation of, her actions.

Pandarus is the final example in *Troilus* of Chaucer's intense interest in character. Boccaccio's Pandare is a young contemporary of Troilo. His role in the plot is significant, as the role of the go-between in any romance would be. He functions, for example, as "Ami" in *Le Roman de la Rose* or as Lunete in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*. But in *Troilus*, Chaucer has transformed and individuated the type. He has extended Pandarus's role beyond the requirements of the plot. Pandarus is developed as a character not unlike the persona of Chaucer we have known in the earlier dream visions and not even unlike the character of Chaucer the narrator. His guileless proverbial nature is totally winning, and his role may be extensive precisely because of Chaucer the poet's continuing interest in the literary representation of himself as a character.

When we first encounter Pandarus in book one, we get a sense that he is selflessly motivated to do anything that would alleviate his friend's suffering.<sup>22</sup> In fact, there is no reason to suspect that he will be anything but typical in a courtly love story. But as the narrative progresses, we notice that Pandarus's involvement with the lovers is extraordinarily manipulative, as if his own disappointed amorousness, discussed at the beginning of book two, can receive voyeuristic satisfaction in bringing his friend and his niece together. The comic mileage Chaucer gets from Pandarus's control of the situation that precipitates the night of love in book three causes us to forget that here is a lovable busybody who may somehow be finding his own gratification in being close to and, perhaps, overseeing the sexual consummation of the relationship. His maturity, moreover, makes it plausible that he is conscious enough of his own motives to offer the long disavowal in book three (238-343), the so-called "baud" speech, in which he explains his distaste for his role and discredits the baser motives that may have created it.

This interest in character over plot in *Troilus* is not peculiar to Chaucer. Courtly romances provided the dream vision writers of the

thirteenth century with a model for their own interest in character, and Chaucer's dream visions followed the model of his predecessors by emphasizing the kind of interiority congenial to a work concentrating on character. In fact, the romance as a narrative genre may be distinguished from other contemporary narrative genres, like the *chansons de geste*, precisely because of its interest in character. Thus, by Chaucer's time, the priority of character—plausible if conventional character—over plot—plausible and consequential action—had been developing for centuries. What is peculiar to *Troilus* is the way in which Chaucer's interest in character led him to develop a narrator of finite consciousness and strong desires, who does not feel free to report events according to his own wishes but who claims to be tied to a given history. Throughout *Troilus* the narrator as a character plays off his own opinions and desires against the givens of Lollius's story, manipulating our responses as he sees fit, yet remaining true to the facts of the history as Lollius said they occurred. The result is a poem whose form contains a tension between a narrator's consciousness of what he wants and the facts he is required to report. It is a tension between objective fact and subjective desire that is never resolved, although it is rendered irrelevant by the narrator's final turn away from the matter entirely to embrace at the end of his work the tranquility of religious truth.

This tension has been so frequently remarked that it needs no reiteration here, except to claim that because of it the poem is never felt as a conclusive form.<sup>23</sup> We can understand better the sense of inconclusiveness that the tension creates by examining elements of the poem's superstructure, the beginnings and ends of the books that call attention to the narrator's manipulation of distance. For example, the narrator brings book two to an end at a point in the action that might otherwise appear inappropriate. Book one had ended with the narrator claiming he was going to "stynte of Troilus a stounde" (1086), after having brought us through the hero's first serious bout with despair. Book two begins, after its proem, with a signification of time in May and with Pandarus bent on making Criseyde aware of Troilus' love for her. The changes of time, scene, and concern seem appropriate for the beginning of a new section. The book concludes with the anxious expectation of a first confrontation between Troilus and Criseyde. It leaves the hero in a "kankedort" (1752). It may be argued, of course,

that this is a good point to end a book, for the felt tension of the hero might make us curious to continue. But since Criseyde has already made clear to Pandarus that she would meet Troilus, although she has not made clear how much she would commit herself to him, the tension we perceive in the form at the end of book two is misleading. It is Troilus's tension, not ours. Besides, the book ends right in the middle of the scene at Deiphebus's house, and when the action gets under way again after the proem to book three, the scene at Deiphebus's house continues to its natural end. The unity of action and place that authors who compose in chapters or books commonly respect here is violated. The reason for the violation, of course, is clear. This is not the point where Troilus's fortunes change, for they began to change in book two; nor is this the point in the narrative where Troilus and Criseyde realize their love for each other, for that too has occurred previously. Book two ends and book three begins at this point in the plot because it is the place where the hero and heroine actually meet each other face to face for the first time. The need to begin a book at the point in the narrative where the lovers meet may explain why Chaucer has split the scene in two. But the split also has the tangential effect of beginning the action of book three in the middle of things, making the consummation of the love between Troilus and Criseyde—the central concern of book three and the only emotional gratification of the entire poem—appear the most epic fact of the poem. This structure also allows the narrator to write in his proem stanzas dedicated to Venus and to the praise of love and its law, subjects appropriate to the events that are about to occur in book three; yet the interruption of the consecutive action of the scene also enables Chaucer to emphasize the narrator's presence at a place where, it could be argued, we need him least, a place where the action has built to a pitch of excitement capable of propelling itself to its natural end without the narrator's formal interruption.

Oppositely, but ultimately to the same effect, book four ends abruptly on perhaps the most seriously desperate note in the poem:

For mannes hed ymagynen ne kan,  
N'entendement considere, ne tonge telle  
The cruele peynes of this sorwful man,  
That passen every torment down in helle.  
For whan he saugh that she ne myghte dwelle,

Which that his soule out of his herte rente,  
 Withouten more, out of the chaumbre he wente.

[1695-1701]

The stanza offers us a hyperbolic analogy for Troilus's pain with which the narrator bows out; then with spare, unadorned language, it suggests Troilus's desperation, the finality with which he accepts his inability to change her mind. Book five begins abruptly without the introduction of a proem or the emotional mediation that it can offer:

Aprochen gan the fatal destyne  
 That Joves hath in disposicioun,  
 And to yow, angry Parcas, sustren thre,  
 Committeth, to don execucioun;  
 For which Criseyde moste out of the town,  
 And Troilus shal dwellen forth in pyne  
 Til Lachesis his thred no lenger twyne.

[1-7]

One more stanza records the length of time that the affair has continued, then, without further ado, turns to Diomedes, who is waiting to retrieve Criseyde. This is the point in the story where the audience most needs the narrator to help. Instead, he keeps himself as much out of the opening of the book as he can and consequently forces us more closely than before into the fiction and the pain that it is describing. It may be that Chaucer did not compose a proem for book five because he saw the end of the book as the most appropriate place to present his narrator's formal observations. But the effect of no formal proem is almost devastating on the reader who, without a mediator, is forced to identify with the lover's pain more intensely. Arguments have been advanced that in an earlier version of *Troilus* books four and five were one book that Chaucer separated into two when he revised the poem.<sup>24</sup> But insofar as we accept the version of the poem Chaucer left us as complete, whether or not it was ever revised, we must accept Chaucer's failure to provide the narrator's accustomed proem as intentional, purposely breaching the narrative distance that the former proems of former books maintained. Moreover, since Chaucer must have known that book five required a proem for the consistency of its structure and that his audience would have been conditioned to expect it there, after he had provided proems for the other books, I can only conclude that

its absence functions slyly to disappoint us of our expectation of finding a narrator, making us thereby consider his absence, even while the absence forces us to identify more intensely with Troilus's pain.

The narrator's involvements, or lack of them, with the formal structure of his poem are akin to the sliding distance that the narrator's involvement with his characters and plot created, and they contribute to the sense of tension that is felt in the poem's total form. The tension occurs precisely because of the narrator's control of our responses to the text he is presenting. On the one hand, he causes us to feel aloof from the narrative by warning us of its sad end, by presenting his own philosophical observations about the nature of fortune and of love, and by forcing us to be involved with his sentiments as well as with him as a fact in the poem. On the other hand, he can beguile us so profoundly by the fictive magic of both his text and his rhetoric that by the end we recognize that our responses have been completely in his control. The narrator has become the first principle of the poem; his consciousness, now intensely pained, now involved, now sympathetic, now moralistic, has challenged the power of the story itself to offer us both "sentence" and "solaas." When the narrator is ambivalent about the values of the actions and of the forces within the world of his poem, we feel ambivalently about them; when he falls in love, so to speak, with the heroine of his own making, so do we; when he grows impatient with Troilus's love-pains and creates humor from them in book one, we grow impatient yet smile; when he sees humor in Troilus's clumsy initiation to love-making in book three, so do we; when he suffers with Troilus in books four and five, excuses or criticizes Criseyde, or feels distaste for Diomedes's oily experienced art, so do we. So much are our responses in the narrator's control, so much has his presence enthralled us in the historical world of his making, that we rarely question his motives.

The narrator's complex involvement, then, greatly contributes to our sense of the poem's inconclusiveness, for the tension that he creates in the form is rarely resolved. Rather, it creates in turn a sense of disjunction between the otherwise conclusive storial materials and the narrative consciousness who, though committed to rendering the facts accurately, repeatedly struggles to ameliorate the moral conclusions that the historical materials require us to draw.<sup>25</sup> No reader of Chaucer's final treatment of Criseyde in book five can avoid the sense of

moral inconclusiveness that the narrator creates as he both faces the facts of his heroine's actions yet tries nonetheless to understand, to mitigate, even to overlook if possible what she has done. The narrator's refusal to draw moral conclusions about Criseyde—"men seyn—I not" (5. 1050)—prepares us for a similar treatment of the hero and of the world of the story as we approach the end of the poem. However, the ending that the narrator offers at that time so strongly contradicts both his sympathetic treatment of his heroine and his sympathetic presentation of the world in which his lovers lived that the ending of *Troilus* comes as a surprise whose effect is not to conclude but to reinforce, even to extend, our sense of the inconclusiveness of meaning in the poem.<sup>26</sup> It is with the ending of *Troilus*, and with its effects, therefore, that I shall be concerned for the remainder of this chapter.

### III

There are actually two endings to *Troilus*, a situation that must inevitably affect the conclusiveness of any poem's form. The first ending (5. 1765-98) brings the plot of *Troilus's* love to its close. It offers a *moralitas* about the proper decorum of lovers, names the poem's genre as a tragedy, and subjects the work to the evaluation of the epic poets, hence to epic tradition. This ending is conclusive, for its morality grows directly out of the poem's action; its envoy and dedication are completely in keeping with the expectations for the genre that the poem has manifested from its first lines. However, the second ending (5. 1799-1869), sometimes called the epilogue, undercuts the sense of conclusiveness we feel from the first. It extends the plot through the death and apotheosis of the hero; it Christianizes the *moralitas* of the first ending by urging young lovers—"he or she" (1835)—to love God before all else; it condemns the activities of the plot and the aspirations of even the most noble characters within it; it even questions the value of "olde clerkis speche / in poetrie" (1854-55) and rededicates the book to the guardianship of a contemporary philosopher and a contemporary moral poet; finally it concludes with a prayer. Needless to say, this double ending creates a peculiar disjunction in the work's form, for its meaning seems to be contradictory. In the context of the rest of the poem, the second ending abruptly opposes the values for which the poem has stood and makes all the sorrow and suffering within it appear both unnecessary and, finally, "untragic."

Although Chaucer does not name the genre of his poem until he reaches the first ending, it is clear from the first lines that the work is a tragedy. Following Aristotle, we think of tragedy as a mimetic form whose plot describes an action, the movement of a hero toward his inexorable destiny, over the course of which he (and the audience) realizes certain truths about justice, human limitation, fallibility, power. D. W. Robertson has argued that Chaucer meant something different by tragedy than we do because he was using not a Greek but a Boethian model of both human fallibility and cosmic providence.<sup>27</sup> Whatever differences exist between Chaucer's understanding of fortune in a Christian universe and our sense of the Greek concept of fate, Chaucer's practice in *Troilus*, and the definitions of tragedy we find in the *Monk's Tale*, show that he was aware of at least two essential qualities inherent in the tragic genre: the sad or disastrous ending, and the suggestion through its form of the limits of human power in a universe greater than human consciousness can reasonably apprehend. What is missing from Chaucer's tragic form is the positive sense of the value of human action that Sophocles before him or Shakespeare after him maintained. Nowhere does Chaucer construct a tragic form whose darkness grows light by the sense of human dignity that an Oedipus can realize by putting out his eyes or a Hamlet can retrieve by his death. The plot of *Troilus*, like the plots of the stories in the *Monk's Tale*, reaches its end in the falling off of man's power at the hands of Fortune. It ends on a pessimistic note of the betrayal of love and the disabuse of an idealistic lover whose mistress has followed the most practical, most opportunistic, course. The world of Chaucer's tragedy is thus bleaker than most other tragedies we know. Ironically, however, the pessimism of the tragic form of *Troilus* occurs because of Chaucer's paradoxical treatment of love, whose carnal and spiritual sides he never distinguishes in the plot, but whose carnal side he condemns at the end.

By means of his narrator and his characters, Chaucer analyzes the nature of love, which he presents both as necessary to the human condition and as the highest good for which man can strive. Early in book one, the narrator offers us a striking simile to describe the necessitarian nature of love:

As proude Bayard gynneth for to skippe  
Out of the weye, so pryketh hym his corn,  
Til he a lasshe have of the long whippe;

Than thynketh he, "Though I prounce al byforn  
 First in the trays, ful fat and newe shorn,  
 Yet am I but an hors, and horses lawe  
 I moot endure, and with my feres drawe";

So ferde it by this fierse and proude knyght:  
 Though he a worthy kynges sone were,  
 And wende nothing hadde had swich myght  
 Ayeys his wille that shuld his herte stere,  
 Yet with a look his herte wax a-ferre,  
 That he that now was moost in pride above,  
 Was sodeynly moost subgit unto love.

[218-31]

The didactic amplification surrounding this simile asserts what the image describes, that love is a condition from which man is not free—"for kaught is proud, and kaught is debonaire" (214)—that all men must love:

For evere it was, and evere it shall byfalle,  
 That Love is he that alle thing may bynde,  
 For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde.

[236-38]<sup>28</sup>

In the proem to book three and in Troilus's praise of love later in that book (1254-74), Chaucer speaks of this necessary condition as the highest good of man's aspirations, the goal to which all nature tends. Never, however, does he distinguish fleshly and spiritual love. Rather, he represents love as a general principle that motivates all action within the poem, as it does within nature. It motivates the narrator to tell his story in the first place; it motivates Troilus both to suffer and to try to win Criseyde; it motivates Criseyde both mysteriously—"who yaf me drynke" (2. 651)—and pragmatically in her choice first of Troilus and then of Diomedes; it also motivates Pandarus to bring together the two lovers, to support their relationship, and to support Troilus after Criseyde departs for the Greek camp. Ironically, and to the ultimate dissolution of the relationship, love even motivates Calchas to seek his daughter from Troy in exchange for Antenor.

The tragedy of *Troilus* is thus a tragedy of earthly love, which the narrator repeatedly asserts is both necessary and good, but which the action of the last two books reveals to be merely necessary. From the



beginning the narrator, Troilus, and Criseyde alternately consider the value of earthly love with respect to necessity. When in book four necessity begins to work against the lovers, Troilus seeks to resolve his practical problems by philosophy.<sup>29</sup> In Jove's Temple he tries to reason himself out of necessity toward a sense of possible freedom for his actions, but a lover and not a theologian, he encounters only frustration. Like the Nun's Priest who cannot "bulte it to the bren" (7. 3240), Troilus can only bring himself to a notion of conditional necessity, the limited end that even Boethius could not transcend without metaphysical help from Lady Philosophy. Consequently, he abandons his will and depends with implicit faith on Jove's benignity. But the Jove to whom Troilus prays, in whose temple he tries to reason, not only remains silent as the denouement of the plot occurs but holds "in disposicioun" the "fatal destyne" (5. 1-2) of the poem's protagonists.

Critics as different as Robertson and Bloomfield have argued that by this dark philosophical turn Chaucer intended to show both the failure of human ability to reason oneself to answers about the nature of man's free will and the uselessness of the pagan gods whom the narrator condemns in his religious ending to the poem. They feel similarly that as a Christian, with full knowledge of salvation, and as a didactic poet, expected to exemplify for his audience the failure of even the most virtuous of pagans, Chaucer intended from the beginning the Christian ending for the tragic form of his poem.<sup>30</sup> Yet, if we consider the *Knight's Tale*, which Chaucer was composing at about the same time, we can see that his Christianity was not necessarily the cause for the tragic form of *Troilus*. The conception of the genre in which he was writing may equally well account for it.

The *Knight's Tale* is similar to *Troilus* in its mixture of seriousness and humor and in its ironic technique to accommodate the disjunction of values in its form. It differs, however, from *Troilus* by virtue of its being, finally, a comedy, cautiously optimistic about man's power to figure out, and in some ways to control, his own destiny. Despite its sad and tragic moments, the tale ends happily, and without the need to transcend its pagan setting. One of the ways in which Chaucer averts the tragic implications of the *Knight's Tale* is by refusing to render from his source, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Arcita's spiritual flight. Thus he avoids making his audience consider from the perspective of eternity

the pettiness or uselessness of human action even in the face of the third book's suggestion of the planet-god's involvement in human affairs. By not using Arcite's flight, Chaucer makes it necessary for a character like Theseus to reason his own way to the meaning of the mysterious accidents that a universe greater than man has imposed upon human will and action.

When Arcite dies in the *Knight's Tale*, the Knight-narrator disclaims knowing the place to which his character's soul has gone. He says he is "no divinistre" (l. 2811). Answers to the important questions that Arcite asks before he dies—"What is this world? What asketh men to have?" (l. 2777)—must be left to the human characters in the story to figure out. Egeus offers a pessimistic, though reality-oriented, apothegm about the limits of life:

This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,  
And we been pilgrymes, passynge to an fro.  
Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore."

[l. 2847-49]

Somehow these truisms gladden Theseus for a while so that, according to human custom, he can have Arcite buried in a traditionally heroic way. At Egeus's suggestion, Theseus has been forced to consider the ultimate necessity of all human beings, namely, that death may not be avoided. By the time the poem reaches its conclusion in the "Chain of Love" speech, however, we find that Theseus has made a virtue of the necessity of death by reasoning his way for his subjects and for us to the idea of continuation through succession. The poem thus becomes tentatively optimistic, for Theseus can suggest how man may soften the pain of mortality and answer Arcite's valedictory questions.

Although it is ironic in connection with *Troilus*, what men ask to have of the world in the *Knight's Tale* is love, which binds together nature and supernature in a chain and enables man to have power over mortality by means of succession. The *Knight's Tale* ends, as all comedy ends, with the universe perceived in a balanced order and with a marriage supposedly ensuring succession. A philosophical attitude, not a religious faith, has averted the pessimistic view of life implicit in Arcite's death and in Egeus's response to it. The heavenly perspective that Arcite's spirit supplies in the *Teseida* is not needed for the *Knight's*

*Tale* because man has reasoned his way to a solution, and, as Theseus' last speech indicates, can even test his philosophical conclusions empirically by observing material phenomena and human institutions like stones, trees, rivers, and civilizations (l. 3016-26). By the end of the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer has brought us to recognize not only the limits of man's power and the failure of human agency in a world of fortune, as *Troilus* posits, but he has shown us as well the extent of man's power and his ability to discover it.

Unlike the *Knight's Tale*, *Troilus* from the first is without any optimism that might mitigate the bleak universe inherent in its tragic vision. Despite all the praise for the power and value of love in the poem, love actually works to devastating effect. No appropriate solution is available to any of the characters of the plot, not even to the narrator outside the plot, except the death of the hero and the defamation of the heroine. The tragic form of the poem shows how historical events necessarily dominate the human spirit and how human beings are impotent to act with lasting efficacy.

In light of both the tragic form of *Troilus* and the irony that imposes the consequences of historical events on human desires, what I have called the first ending of the poem seems too trivial, insufficient to the task of the ending. To be sure, Boccaccio's *Filostrato* had concluded with an admonition to men not to get involved with such sensual and fickle women as Criseida, and Chaucer's first ending, urging "every lady bright of hewe / and every gentil woman" (5. 1772-73), *not* to be like Criseyde, represents a similar moral conclusion. But the world of *Troilus* is too complicated, too charged with ambiguous philosophical and complex psychological issues, never implied by Boccaccio's version, to allow a comment about the decorum of lovers to suffice for a conclusion. We may assume that Chaucer understood this and found in Arcite's flight above the earth, and in the changed perspective on earthly activity that the *Teseida* provided, a more appropriate way to end his poem satisfactorily. But just as the first ending of *Troilus* seems insufficient to the complex meaning of the poem, so his second ending seems oversufficient, for it actually denies tragedy as a necessary condition and makes all the talk in the poem about necessity in love, in will, in history, seem unimportant in a way it had not seemed until that point.

Despite all the pain and disappointment that Fortune and Criseyde's actions have caused, Chaucer has made *Troilus* so clearly a poem in praise of the wondrous vicissitudes of earthly love that when the narrator turns, after the envoy in which he calls his poem a tragedy, to deny the value of love, many readers feel uneasy, if not embarrassed, about their own previous involvement with the lovers and their plight.<sup>31</sup> From the vantage point of the eighth sphere, the sublunary world must truly appear no greater than a mustard seed. The timelessness of eternity, to which we are exhorted to repair at the end, makes the cell of earth and the behavior of its inhabitants appear as busy as an anthill. Yet, just as an ant's-eye view of his own world would undoubtedly see order and meaning in the activity, so we have seen order and meaning in the world of human action, in its wars, its wooing, its religious observances, albeit pagan, and in its parties and politics. Although the narrator has warned us throughout the poem that the story would end wretchedly, the plot has continually beguiled us away from those warnings. The narrator, moreover, has encouraged our interest in the hopes and fears of his characters and has continually caused us to take seriously both the power and the weakness of the human condition. Ours is not the first age to recognize *Troilus* as an important and meaningful statement about the relationship between necessity and human aspirations before the age of grace. But in our day, we need exegetes like Robertson to remind us that the Christian message implicit throughout the poem is related to *contemptus mundi*, for Chaucer the narrator refuses to remind us.

Because the narrator refuses to remind us of this message, although he warns us of the sad end of the story, the standard Christian *moralitas* that readers of medieval literature expect as a matter of course and that the narrator finally provides at the end does not feel appropriate, not at least in the intensity with which he admonishes us with it. Not only does he have the spirit of the dead hero "lough" at the weeping mourners and damn "al oure werk that foloweth so / the blynde lust, the which that may not laste" (1823-24); he addresses us in formal exemplary rhetoric about the ultimate worthlessness of the values that his poem has incorporated:

Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love!  
Swich fyn hath al his grete worthynesse!

Swich fyn hath his estat real above,  
Swich fyn his lust, swich fyn hath his noblesse!  
Swich fyn hath false worldes brotelnesse!

[1828-32]

And again three stanzas later:

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites,  
Lo here, what alle hire goddes may availle;  
Lo here, thise wrecched worldes appetites;  
Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille  
Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!

[1849-53]

He even rejects the value of his own endeavors as a scholar and poet whose literary career has been spent in reading the poetry of others.

Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche  
In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.

[1854-55]

The intensity and extent of these condemnations make us feel that the narrator might be overreacting, the consequence of which, in this case, is to overconclude.

It is a commonplace of psychology that overreactions are immoderate responses to a situation, motivated by a feeling of the insufficiency of a more measured response. The second ending of *Troilus* appears to be such an overreaction, motivated by a sense of the insufficiency of the first ending to the demands of the work. As a result, it is an overconclusion that not only overwhelms the moral implications of the first ending but undercuts as well our sense of the poem's genre. I do not believe that the second ending may be read merely as an aspect of what C. S. Lewis has called Chaucer's practice of "medievalizing" Boccaccio's Renaissance work by opening out his story didactically to the topic of salvation, the ultimate Christian purpose of all literature.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the ending denies the magnificent tragic meaning about the ultimate pain of the human condition—a central concern of all tragedy—whose conclusions were clear from the poem's first lines. With this second ending, Chaucer is implying the critical notion, often held since his time, that tragedy cannot truly exist in a Christian universe. The shift in perspective away from a concern with earth and its affairs, which constitutes the second ending of *Troilus*, creates an

inconclusiveness in the poem's form. The overreactive last stanzas of heavy moral rhetoric function as a structural correlative to Chaucer's ironic technique throughout the narrative, working as the narrator's involvement with his materials has been working.

In *Troilus* Chaucer has presented us with a form of fiction in which the content is mediated through a persona with an individuated psychology. Although this kind of persona-mediated fiction is intrinsic to the dream vision form, in *Troilus* it manifests itself differently because of the storial nature of the material to which the narrator commits himself. We can see in the procedure a clear anticipation of Chaucer's procedure in the more complex form of the *Canterbury Tales*, where a narrator will tell a storial narrative completely in the control of his or her own narrative consciousness. There are great differences between the two forms, in part because the narrator of *Troilus* claims to be the author himself at work on a text, whereas the narrators of the *Canterbury Tales* are not. But the devices of composition in *Troilus*, like the poems, work like a frame and a framed matter and control the felt distance between the audience and the text. Chaucer will use this device again and again in his last work. Having developed himself as a character in his earlier poems, Chaucer now in *Troilus* develops his power as a poet who can determine and control a storial narrative through that same fictional consciousness. For this reason, perhaps, *Troilus* has been called the first modern novel, if by novel we mean a fiction determined and controlled by a narrator created separate (though not necessarily different) from the author. The inconclusiveness of such a literary form resides in the narrator's individual psychology combined with his total control of his materials, which make the view of things he represents necessarily partial.

The *Legend of Good Women*, which depends on *Troilus* for its motive, and which Chaucer presumably was writing during the time when he was composing the earlier part of the *Canterbury Tales*, continues to develop the persona of Geoffrey in the dream vision part and the narrator Chaucer in the storial part. It is at once a dream vision and a set of storial narratives, using the technique of mediating a narrative through a narrator's psychology. As I shall show in the next chapter, the poem is unsuccessful not only because it is incomplete and desultory but because, curiously, it is Chaucer's only major work whose form is not inconclusive.

## V. "Redy to Wenden": The *Legend of Good Women* and the Outer Form of the *Canterbury Tales*



Though incomplete, the *Legend of Good Women* resolves the problems it raises. It is a conclusive narrative form. Its conclusiveness may be one reason why it has generally been considered one of Chaucer's least successful works. Once the storial part of the poem gets under way, readers either lose interest in its content or grow impatient with its execution.<sup>1</sup> Yet the form of the *Legend of Good Women* is interesting to think about in context of Chaucer's other narratives, for it marks a simple development from Chaucer's earlier works whose result is complicated and significant.<sup>2</sup> The poem combines a dream-vision prologue and a set of storial narratives into one composite, consequent structure whose form resembles no earlier work by Chaucer, although it is remarkably similar to the more complex form of the *Canterbury Tales* in the way it combines an outer form, or frame, with an inner form of stories. In the first part of this chapter, I shall discuss the conclusiveness and composite structure of the *Legend of Good Women*, which functions as a prototype for the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales*. In the second part, I shall turn to the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales* to examine the relationship between the work's inconclusiveness and the multi-level complexity of the outer form.

The plot of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* relates how Chaucer has a vision in which the God of Love is angry with him for having written of a bad woman in *Troilus*. Queen Alceste, a very good woman indeed, intercedes on Chaucer's behalf; she tempers the God of Love's rage by ordering the poet to do penance for his poetic sin:

Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yere,  
The moste partye of thy tyme spende  
In makynge of a glorious legende

Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,  
 That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves:  
 And telle of false men that hem bytraien,  
 That al hir lyf ne do nat but assayen  
 How many women they may doon a shame;  
 For in youre world that is now holde a game.  
 And thogh the lyke nat a lovee bee,  
 Speke wel of love; this penance yive I thee.

[F, 481-91]

The persona Chaucer undertakes the penance, although the poet Chaucer never finishes the work. Yet the form of the poem is conclusive because Chaucer continually writes of good women who "weren trewe in lovyng" and of "false men that hem bytraien." He could have spent the rest of his life on the project, progressively adding more legends of either good women or false men—the list of such classical stories seems to be endless. But he could not have made the poem's form more conclusive than it already is since the poem's conclusiveness resides not in its execution, for which completion would be a necessary consideration, but in its plan, which is to reiterate by different examples a continuously singular theme.

The single-minded didactic impulse that propels the legends is finally of limited interest, despite certain felicities of style and an occasionally interesting use of rhetorical tropes. The reason, I think, is clear from the first legend. Cleopatra is a perverse choice of a good woman and might have offered the narrator the chance to characterize in smaller form someone potentially as rich as Criseyde. But Chaucer avoids or overlooks any details of his heroine's life or behavior that might lead him away from his singular narrative purpose of speaking well of women who were true in loving and badly of men who were not.

When details periodically stand out in the legends, they seem momentarily curious or dissonant to the univocal didactic injunction, but the narrator soon makes them relevant to his theme. Instead of letting them stand or developing them to some point of ambiguity—a method of which Chaucer was fond in his earlier works—the narrator directs attention to the moral conclusion that may be drawn from the detail. Here, for example, is the suicide of Lucrece:



But pryvely she kaughte forth a knyf,  
 And therwithal she rafte hirself hir lyf;  
 And as she fel adoun, she kaste hir lok,  
 And of hir clothes yet she hede tok.  
 For in hir fallynge yet she had a care,  
 Lest that hir fet or suche thyng lay bare;  
 So wel she loved clenness and eke trouthe.

[1854-60]

The point about Lucrece's modesty is striking. When the same detail is used in the tragedy of Julius Caesar in the *Monk's Tale*, it unexpectedly complicates our assessment of the emperor's "manhede," which, along with "wisdom" and "greet labour," brought him "from humble bed to roial magestee" (CT, 7. 2671-72). It also enriches our understanding of the Monk as a character. In this passage, however, the detail suggests no ambiguity. Lucrece's sexual modesty is a necessary element of a virtuous wife's nature that the narrator uses for the conclusive purpose of speaking well of women.

What is true about details within the stories is also true about the total form of each of the legends. Whether a legend is about a questionably good woman, like Cleopatra, an unquestionably good woman, like Lucrece, a woman like Thisbe, whose virtue has never been a part of our interest in her story, or one like Philomela, whose violent revenge, though justified, seems irrelevant to the narrator's purpose of writing about the good woman as passive victim, there is something about the form of each story that remains flat. The reader carries away two general senses of the form of the individual legends: first, they are shaped as a series of brief—sometimes too brief—descriptive narratives interspersed with, or followed by, a series of complaints about the suffering of betrayed lovers; and second, their totality is one of pathos, unabashed, indulgent, and without much of the irony Chaucer characteristically uses to contain and control his interest in the pathetic elsewhere. Although irony is present in some of the legends, like those of Thisbe or of Hypsipyle and Medea, it is an irony available only to the learned who study the same stories in other versions.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, we need to know what Chaucer did to Ovid to appreciate the irony. It is not readily available in the text itself. Pathos, rather than irony, controls affect in the poem, yet the pathos of each story is so

much of a piece that the general sense of the nine legends taken together is curiously similar to the sense one gets from other penances, like a set of Hail Marys or Our Fathers that a sinner repeats in order to atone for his sin. Although the repeated prayer may cleanse chanters or help them transcend their state, it mesmerizes others who hear it but who are not caught in the same state of feeling.

I do not know what event at court caused Chaucer to write the *Legend of Good Women* as a penance and to select the format that requires a series of brief stories with the same intention and in the same pathetic mode. John Fisher suggests that both the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Legend of Good Women* "appear to stem from the same royal command."<sup>4</sup> Since we have no biographical data to confirm the speculation, it seems as fruitful to ask what this list of stories, similarly narrated, suggests about Chaucer's literary consciousness.

Robert Worth Frank has argued that in the *Legend of Good Women* Chaucer was working toward a narrative form concerned with "feeling" and that he was developing "an awareness of the problem of 'characterization,' " with its emphasis on "role" and a "sense of personality."<sup>5</sup> Frank's argument sustains my own. It is especially important to consider that role and a sense of personality give the form of the *Canterbury Tales* its most intense dramatic quality. Yet, in his attempt to give more dignity to the legends by showing them to be intrinsically interesting, and by arguing that Chaucer did not abandon them because he was bored by them, Frank overlooks both the truly monotonous effect of the legends taken together and the significance of the monotony.<sup>6</sup>

The nine narratives comprise a series of stories reiterating a common theme and a common mood. Taken as a whole, they constitute a single structure, a tale, as the Monk's series of tragedies constitute a tale, which the persona tells for a certain purpose.<sup>7</sup> As a single tale, this series is unrelentingly tedious. Chaucer is never so consistently and extensively tedious elsewhere, unless he intends to be, as in the *Monk's Tale*, or in the *Melibee* where the pilgrim Chaucer, interrupted from telling his tale of Sir Thopas, responds to criticism of his abilities by offering a "litel tretys" that turns out to be an enormously long and redundant moral tract. The consistently reiterative structure of the storial section of the *Legend of Good Women* has a mesmerizing effect,

as if the poet were doing penance with a vengeance on an audience that may have required him to undertake the project in the first place. If it is true that the effect of the storied portion of the *Legend of Good Women* is intentional, then we need to look at the prologue to the poem, and at the persona in the prologue, to see how and why Chaucer develops the familiar figure of himself as persona into a fictional character motivated to produce the effect. Once we have examined this development in the presentation of the persona, we shall be able to examine the entire composite structure of the *Legend of Good Women* to see how the form of the poem functions as a prototype for the form of the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>8</sup>

The persona of the prologue is a man familiar to readers of Chaucer's earlier dream visions, except that he is neither hysterical, as in the *House of Fame*, nor afraid of his own skepticism, as in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Otherwise he is quite recognizable. He is a poet, he likes books, except in May when he likes flowers, especially the daisy. He is skeptical, in this case about the afterlife; but since no one has ever returned to talk about the afterlife, he believes that we must believe in things that cannot be proved by sense experience. He is, thus, still the man with abiding interest in what Payne has called the theme of "the nature and functions of art and the justification of the artist."<sup>9</sup> The first forty lines of the prologue in both versions raise the issue of the limitation of human knowledge and the need to believe opinions from books of the past about facts that an individual cannot himself verify firsthand; they also urge us to honor these books "there we han noon other preve" (F, 28). In the earlier dream visions, the persona was frightened by his inability to understand the truth-value of literary traditions and frightened even when presented in the dream with firsthand experience. In this poem the persona is committed to believing authoritative opinion even without personal experience—"Bernard the monk ne saugh nat all, pardee!" (F, 16). He is willing to have "feyth and ful credence" (F, 31) in books and in authority.

The persona has a vision in which the God of Love accuses him of having sinned against love. Despite his protestations of innocence and no indication that he ever feels any contrition for what he has done (F, 462-74), he undertakes a penance to please Alceste and to pacify the wrath of the God of Love. The penance, of course, is the series of

legends of good women; but because the persona feels no remorse—in fact, because he feels that he is innocent—the undertaking is without the energy that derives from the contrite and without the interest that motivated him elsewhere. The voice of the narrator of these legends, then, must not be heard as the voice of Chaucer the persona familiar to us from Chaucer's other poems. Rather, in the prologue the familiar Chaucerian persona develops into a yet more complicated fictional character because he agrees to take an identity not consistent with his own sense of himself. More significantly, he agrees to project this identity through the stories he tells.<sup>10</sup>

The F prologue makes little explicit connection between the theme of belief and the charges of betrayal. The persona raises the issue of belief again (F, 97–102) and claims that he will explain what he means at the appropriate moment—"whanne that I see my tyme" (F, 101). But it is forgotten as the plot moves on to the adoration of the daisy and then to the vision of the God of Love and of Alceste. The G prologue, however, corrects and clarifies somewhat why the persona begins his poem about a vision with the trope of belief in things not seen with the eye. In it the persona tells us:

But wherfore that I spak, to yeve credence  
 To bokes olde and don hem reverence,  
 Is for men shulde autoritees beleve,  
 There as there lyth non other assay by preve.  
 For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,  
 The naked text in English to declare  
 Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,  
 As autours seyn; leveth hem if yow leste!

[G, 81–88]

Here our interest is directed not to the prologue itself but to the series of tales of good women, intended to follow the prologue, that the persona will indite from old sources. By the time he revised his prologue, Chaucer must have recognized that the trope of belief was significant for the second part of the new form he was creating. Moreover, in the G prologue, the poet understood that although he chose to believe things the eye could not necessarily see, there might be those who would choose not so to believe. Thus he gives his readers the freedom to doubt by concluding his remarks with a statement of choice—"leveth hem if yow leste!"

In the time between the writing of the first prologue and the second, Chaucer must have recognized that he was evolving a new form, one that he had not developed earlier but that he would continue to develop in the form of the *Canterbury Tales*, a work he may also have been beginning at that time. This would be a form containing a dream-vision of personal experience and a story, or group of stories, rendered from "olde bokes." The persona would be characterized by his actions and by what others said about him, and the voice of the story, or stories, that he rendered would somehow accord with the personality that the prologue established.

The form may be diagrammed abstractly as a bipartite structure combined by a linear causality: since A, then B. Part A, the dream-vision prologue, consists of a plot of fixed dimension whose concern motivates part B. Part B, the storial unit, comprises a series of plots, discreet unto themselves yet of a theme that can be repeated indefinitely. Despite the causality between parts A and B, however, the form of the work is not organic. Rather it is serial. It can be experienced partially, either A or B, or parts of B; yet its parts are not independent, since all units of the storial part have a first cause, a character, voice, or consciousness developed in A and projected through B. Moreover, just as any unit of part B takes significance from part A in the total form, so part A requires at least some units of part B for its own fulfillment. Yet part A puts no limit on how often the discreet units of part B may be repeated. In the retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer mentions that the *Legend of Good Women* had stories about twenty-five ladies, suggesting that he had set a limit on the number of variations he intended. Our evidence shows that he actually stopped before he finished nine legends; but we also know from part A of the *Legend of Good Women* that Alceste wants him to continue the undertaking for the rest of his life, an appalling wish. Whatever the number, however, the form of the poem is conclusively realized as soon as one or two of the units of part B appear. Despite the limitless repetitive possibilities of part B, the demands of the form have been satisfied as soon as the series is under way.

The similarity of the form of the *Canterbury Tales* to this form is clear. Like the *Legend of Good Women*, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* consists of two major structural parts, A and B. The A part, a prologue extended into narrative links, motivates and causes B. B is a set of

units, tales in different voices, at once discreet, capable of being read without their connection to A, yet dependent, motivated by the events that transpire in A and enriched in meaning by the characters and by some issues encountered there. The A section offers an original plan that thirty tellers will tell four tales each, but that original plan is altered during the course of the work and is never fully realized. As with *Legend of Good Women*, however, the number of units making up the B section of the *Canterbury Tales* is not as important as the fact of the causal relationship between those units and the A section, and the perhaps paradoxical quality of independence that each of the units manifests. Moreover, although the B section of the form of the *Canterbury Tales* comprises storial narratives, as does the B section of the *Legend of Good Women*, the tales in the earlier poem follow upon each other in an unattached serial order, whereas in the *Canterbury Tales* they are significantly attached to the links developed from the A section. This attachment alters the nature of their serial quality.

Donald Howard, after Paul Ruggiers, has conveniently called the two major elements of the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* the inner and the outer forms.<sup>11</sup> The nature of the relationship between these two elements of the form and the inconclusive structuring of the inner form will be the subject of the next chapter. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall examine how Chaucer developed the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales*, the A section, beyond its model in the *Legend of Good Women* so that it could accommodate the massive amount of storial narrative he had planned for it. Then I shall examine how Chaucer made what was conclusive in the *Legend of Good Women* inconclusive in the *Canterbury Tales*, resulting in a large narrative form that could suggest a multifaceted, yet valid, sense of subjective experience and opinion about the nature of the world.

## II

J. V. Cunningham has convincingly argued that "the literary form to which the *Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* belongs and of which it is a special realization is the form of the dream-vision prologue in the tradition of the *Romance of the Rose* and of those associated French and English poems of the subsequent century and a half."<sup>12</sup> The form of the *Prologue* is thus the same as the form of the A section of the *Legend*

of *Good Women*, although the ways in which it is different seem to me as significant in accounting for its success as Cunningham's argument for the ways in which it is the same. Let us look at some of these differences.

Although the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales* resembles Chaucer's dream visions in its use of recognizable conventions, like the journey, it is not a dream vision. The persona never falls asleep, nor does he claim to be recording an experience in a dream. Rather, he rehearses a waking event, a journey through geographical reality from Southwerk to Canterbury. The familiar spring trope that opens the prologue does not induce sleep and the loosening of the imagination in dreams about love or truth. Rather, the opening lines energize the human species to action; they emphasize the copulating of nature's elements, the production of the new. The riches of these lines have been so frequently mined that we need not examine them here, except to point out that like many of Shakespeare's sonnets the grammatical structure of the first sentence develops a causal relationship between nature's fecund impulses and man's urges to do, to act, to move, and not to sleep or wonder. Chaucer connects the "when" of April (1), the "when" of Zephyrus (5), the assumed "when" of the "yonge sonne" (7), and of the birds who "maken melodye" (9), with the "then" of people who long "to goon" on pilgrimages, to "seken straunge strondes" (13), and to "wende" (16) from all over England, the geographical place, to the specific shrine of Canterbury. Like the generalized "folk" (10), and the more specific "palmeres" (13), the persona is also in a state of energized becoming. He tells us that he "lay" at the Tabard Inn "redy to wenden on my pilgrimimage" (20-21). In precisely the place where we would expect the sleeping and the dream to occur "at nyght" (23), after the "sonne was to reste" (30), the persona sees that he has "time and space" (35) to tell us about the people who accompanied him on his journey. Chaucer may have discovered from the F version of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* that sleeping was not necessary for visioning—although changes in the G version suggest that he was uncomfortable with the idea. In this form, however, the persona does not go to sleep at night; but if sleep and dreams are automatic assumptions of this form, then the sleep will be like that of the birds who "slepen al the nyght with open ye" (10), for the portraits of characters

that follow the opening lines involve details that are quite undreamlike. They are filled with actual details of geography, generally of little interest to a dream vision, but of considerable interest to the reporter of actualities: the Knight's battles in identifiable though outlying regions; the Squire's campaigns in the Low Countries; the Prioress's convent at Stratford atte Bowe, the Merchant's concern for the ports of Middelburgh and Orewelle, and so on.

In the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is externalizing the usually internalized dream vision. Historical time and space are significant. There is evening, a next morning, an identifiable inn in a familiar locale with a historically known innkeeper. Later, in the links that extend the outer form, there is movement through measureable, known, and familiar landscape. The dream-vision conventions have been altered to appear actual rather than ideal, journalistic rather than imaginative, objective rather than subjective. Absent from the form as we have come to know it in Chaucer's earlier works are the expressions of anxiety about truth, and about how books, learning, and dream experience can show truth. Absent as well are concerns about poetic identity and value, the appropriate and best subjects of poetry, and the relation between poetry and truth. Present is the desire to have words "be cosyn to the dede" (742), record what happened as it happened, speak plainly (727), not feign (734-35). In short, the persona is here concerned with mimesis, a concept Chaucer probably absorbed from the tradition of Plato's *Timeus*. In the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is no longer interested in the relationship of aesthetic or poetic questions to truth, certainty, and belief; rather, he is interested in how to depict an actuality as it was perceived by the senses and as it is now being remembered.

There is a formal corollary to this new interest in reporting an actuality in the past rather than a dream of the imagination. Chaucer extends the form of the dream-vision prologue, now perhaps better called the recollection, into a series of narrative links that chart the journey more or less specifically and relate the events as they developed through time. These links frame the storial materials that occupy the bulk of the new form, altering the serial nature of the fictions as the B part of the *Legend of Good Women* presents it. The links create a frame



structure in which the outer form, reporting historical actuality, surrounds the inner form, narratives expressed by actual, or at least stipulated, people. In the *Canterbury Tales*, storytelling is no longer an act of personal commitment to authority for the sake of bringing the audience to see the correct moral, as it had been in *Troilus*; it is neither an activity of imaginative experience in dreams, as it had been in the dream visions, nor a distasteful penance for a sin not felt as significant, as it was in the *Legend of Good Women*. Surrounded by an actualistic frame, storytelling becomes a representation in fictional form of imagined attitudes toward the world, meant at once simply to pass time and to reveal the natures of an established assortment of people from different levels of society. This unique form has the consequence, or end, of suggesting that subjective opinion is valid, that many opinions, the vicious as well as the virtuous, make it difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain with certainty the absolute truth of any matter—as, say, the matter of marriage—that certainty is contingent upon possibility. Finally, it suggests that reality may be expressed pluralistically. The formal corollary to this new kind of fictional structure is that inconclusiveness is no longer a problem the form manifests by representing anxieties about how to ascertain and express truth. Rather, inconclusiveness is a manner of representing complexity and multifariousness. Its power is that it does not conclude, draw the line, cease. In the form of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has made virtue of necessity by developing a narrative form congenial to his own interests and techniques, yet without the problem to his moral nature that the use of first-person subjective form produced and without the peculiar kind of tension created in *Troilus* between what the narrator wanted for his fiction and what he had to give it because of authority. Moreover, with this form, Chaucer is less likely to be misunderstood and accused, as he had been for his writing *Troilus*. Here, the persona, now character, is freed from the moral responsibility of his writing: "blameth nat me"; "my wit is short"; "he moot reherce as ny as evere he kan"—disclaimers abound. Consequently, he can experiment, test, question all the themes that had previously interested him. By writing the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer discovers a narrative form experimental by nature, needing neither completion nor conclusiveness. With this form

he can project onto imagined characters, whom he claims to be real, imagined opinions expressed through stories that he claims these characters told.

Howard is undoubtedly correct in arguing that, since what we have of the *Canterbury Tales* is all we are ever likely to get, we might as well view it as a whole, even in its fragmentary state.<sup>13</sup> One assumes that, since the work is conceived as a journal of a completed past event, Chaucer originally intended to complete it, for he had in mind a complete journey. Although that journey ends, finally, in Canterbury after most, though not all, of the pilgrims have told one tale, not back at Southwerk after each of the pilgrims has told two tales going and two returning, the *Canterbury Tales* is ended. In the prologue to the *Parson's Tale*, we are prepared for an ending; the tale by the Parson is a spiritually appropriate meditation on the moral, or immoral, life and on salvation; even the imagery of copulation and fructification, introduced in the *General Prologue*, is reintroduced in the last fragment to knit up the matter by suggesting that the true fruit of human desire is salvation; finally, the author's leave-taking of his book after the *Parson's Tale* asserts that we have reached the end. Because of these indications, the *Canterbury Tales* may be said to be ended, closed, or shut.<sup>14</sup> But the middle of the work is open. The order of its parts is by no means certain. Nor is the girth of its content. We have no idea how many people after the Canon's Yeoman might have or could have ridden up; we have no idea whether or not the Plowman, the Guildsmen, or the Yeoman would have told tales or what the nature of their tales would have been. The *Canterbury Tales* ends because the author stopped his writing. But it is neither complete, since it does not fulfill either of its stated intentions, nor conclusive, since it nowhere settles the issues it raises.

A narrative form cannot be conclusive that allows for opposing claims but refuses to evaluate or judge.<sup>15</sup> In the *Canterbury Tales* each character represents in a tale an attitude toward the world. The Knight's is noble, the Miller's is not; the Reeve's is vicious, the Franklin's is not. Each attitude expresses an opinion that derives from a particular set of values. No opinion is true or untrue; no set of values absolute. The Wife of Bath urges experience against authority, the Franklin urges "gentillesse"; Chaucer the pilgrim urges prudence, the

Manciple urges silence; the Second Nun revokes carnality, the Canon's Yeoman revokes alchemy; the Parson revokes the world of both flesh and fiction; Chaucer the maker revokes those tales that "sownen into synne." But the *Canterbury Tales* urges all possibilities and revokes none. Possibility is the central concern of the entire work and inconclusiveness is the means through which the form expresses it. Just as the tales about Sir Thopas and by the Monk are purposefully incomplete, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* is purposefully inconclusive.

I am interested in two ways that Chaucer makes the outer form of the *Canterbury Tales* inconclusive: his method of making authoritative adjudication impossible and his method of creating in the portraits of the *General Prologue* characters of varying, though plausible, attitudes whose later tales suggest plausible, though varying, versions of reality.

The narrator asserts in the *General Prologue* that he has no intention of mediating or of evaluating the actions or the opinions of the people he has met:

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan  
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,  
Ore ellis he moot telle his tale untrewē,  
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.  
He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;  
He moot as wel seye o word as another.

[731-38]

The poetic intention of the *Canterbury Tales*, then, will not be to tell a truth in order to create an appropriate moral response; rather it will be to tell the truth of an experience exactly as it happened. The narrator's responsibility is to "pleynly speke" (727) about what he encountered; it is not to judge.

The narrator is so committed to this journalistic rehearsal of his experience that he even refuses to edit or judge remarks or tales by characters, such as the Miller, whose concerns might outrage his audience's sense of decorum. Knowing, because he has supposedly experienced it, that the *Miller's Tale* might be offensive to some, he warns us that we are about to hear an outrageous piece, but he refuses to

alter in any way the piece or the manner of its presentation. In the prologue to the *Miller's Tale*, he tells us what his responsibility as a reporter entails:

I moot reherce  
 Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,  
 Or elles falsen som of my mateere.  
 And therfore, whoso list it nat yheere,  
 Turne over the leef and chese another tale;  
 For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,  
 Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,  
 And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.  
 Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.  
 The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;  
 So was the Reve eek and othere mo,  
 And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.  
 Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame.

[1. 3173-85]

These lines repeat the intention to rehearse the entire matter as it happened but add that the responsibility for judging lies with us. *We* must know what we are interested in hearing; *we* must recognize that churls tell churlish things; *we* are free to "chese another tale" if our sensibilities are offended; *we* make the wrong choices.

As if to confound any attempt we might make to establish an authoritative model of adjudication for the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer gives us Harry Bailly as host and self-proclaimed judge on the pilgrimage. Harry's stated literary standards are Horatian, offering the prize to the "tales of best sentence and moost solaas" (798). But since it is one major purpose of the *Canterbury Tales* to raise many philosophical, generic, social, and psychological issues, it is difficult to imagine the Horatian standard as an appropriate measuring stick or to imagine Harry objectively measuring with it even if it were. Harry is petty bourgeois—"a fairer burgeys is ther noon in Chepe" (754)—whose motives for action are always personal and economic. He is a "myrie man" (757), but he does not begin to "pleyen" (758) with the pilgrims until *after* "we hadde maad oure rekenynges" (760). He decides to accompany the pilgrims because he wants them to return to the Tabard Inn after their journey and because, we learn in later links, an absence from his wife Goodelief would come as a welcome vacation in the name of profit. True, he has an appropriate sense of social hierarchy that

ought to qualify him to be a judge of social situations. Hence the "cut" falls to the Knight "by adventure, or sort, or cas" (844)—or by Harry's tampering;<sup>16</sup> but he is easily overborne by churls, as the Miller shows after the Knight has finished the first story.

Harry's judgments are often peculiar and always subjective. At times they have little relevance to the tale he is supposed to be judging. He insults the Pardoner, perhaps justifiably, defending himself against the Pardoner's insinuations about his sinfulness; and he insults the Monk whose tale, admittedly dull, is filled with the sententiousness Harry himself has requested. He trivializes the moral of the *Shipman's Tale*, has an unexpectedly hysterical—perhaps inebriated—response to the *Physician's Tale*, takes sides between the Canon and the Canon's Yeoman, attacks the Parson and the Reeve, and chides the Franklin, the pilgrim Chaucer, and the Cook. He is not a trustworthy judge.

As opposed to the narrator's refusal to judge and Harry Bailly's bias in judging, there is a judgment by the pilgrims, either as a group or as individuals. Sometimes the judgment comes forth in universal consensus, as after the *Prioress's Tale* where we are told that "every man / as sobre was that wonder was to see" (7. 691–92). Sometimes it is a group judgment, as when the "gentils" react to Harry's request that the Pardoner tell "som myrthe or japes" by crying "Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!" (6. 319–24). Most frequently, however, another character responds to a tale or to a situation. The nature of these responses is varied, now direct, as with the Merchant to the *Clerk's Tale*, now indirect, as with the Franklin to the *Squire's Tale*, now as a keeper of the peace, as with the Knight to the Monk and Pardoner, now as an aggrieved party, as with the Reeve and Summoner to the Miller and Friar. Whether or not we accept the judgment depends on how reliable or noble we perceive the judge to be. Since we perceive the Knight as an ideal character, and his tale as a "noble" tale, we accept as just his interruption of the Monk and his peace-keeping role at the end of the *Pardoner's Tale*. Otherwise, we may only ask whether or not the response and judgment are appropriate, for we recognize personal and, at times, vicious motives behind the response. Since our acceptance of a character's judgment of another character or tale depends on what we know about the characters from their portraits, let us look at Chaucer's method of constructing them in the *General Prologue*.

Chaucer creates portraits in a traditional form, the catalogue, and

according to commonly assumed principles of rhetorical *descriptio*.<sup>17</sup> But the portraits are unique in the tradition of medieval catalogue portraiture because Chaucer juxtaposes detail in them, which results in an inconclusive or, at least, open-ended portrait form that he may develop in the narrative links. From these portraits come the various consciousnesses who project their personalities through the stories they tell, and hence control meaning in the inner form of the *Canterbury Tales*. Thus, they contribute to making the work inconclusive, concerned as much with psychological plausibility and opinion as with moral truth. To recognize how the unique style and structure in these portraits makes them inconclusive, we must first understand the nature and end of medieval catalogue portraits in general.

Rhetorical *descriptio* in the form of a catalogue is one of the most basic techniques for establishing character in the Middle Ages. Manuals like those by Geoffroi de Vinsauf and Matthieu de Vendome direct would-be writers to describe character according to a commonly assumed symbolism of face and body.<sup>18</sup> Although the conventions for the symbolism derive originally from the Neoplatonic and allegorical world of medieval perception and interpretation, the technique came also to be used on nonallegorical but nonetheless conventional characters like heroes and heroines of courtly romance.<sup>19</sup> Whatever the literary mode, the catalogue portrait was static rather than dynamic and avoided specific individuation by using generalized physical detail to suggest an abstract ideal ultimately for moral evaluation. Here, for instance, is Guillaume's description of the face of Idleness from the first part of *Le Roman de la Rose*:

Cheveus ot blons come bacins,  
 la char plus tendre que poucins,  
 front reluisant, sorciex votis;  
 li entr'ieuz ne fu pas petis,  
 ainz ert assez grant par mesure;  
 le nés ot bien fait a droiture  
 et les ieuz vers come faucons.  
 Por feire envie a ces bricons,  
 douce aleine ot et savoree,  
 et face blanche et coloree,  
 la bouche petite et grossete,  
 s'ot ou menton une fossete. . . .<sup>20</sup>

[Her hair was yellow as a golden bowl, her flesh more tender than a little girl's, her forehead radiant, with arched brows; the space between her eyes was not small, but just the right size; her nose was straight and well-formed, and her eyes colored as a falcon's. Enviably were her soft, sweet breath, her face of pink and white, her mouth small but ample, her dimpled chin. . . .]

The description continues down to her feet in an assumed and expected order, classifying rather than individuating according to notions of ideal beauty. As with Idleness, the other personifications in the courtly dance that the dreamer joins are all composed of generalized qualities of ideal beauty. The audience understands the symbolic meaning of the physical qualities so that a poet rarely needs to direct his audience's attention to it.

Occasionally, we find aspects of this non-individuated, generalized physiology in the *General Prologue*. In the portrait of the Squire, the modifiers defy specificity, although their sum total is of courtly excellence: "evene," "wonderly," "greet," "fresshe," "faire," "weel." The same is true of those elements of the Prioress's portrait that represent her as a courtly lady:

*Ful semyly* hir wympul pynched was  
Hir nose *tretys*, hir eyen greye as glas,  
Hir mouth *ful* smal, and therto *softe* and *reed*;  
But sikerly she hadde a *fair* forheed.

[151-54]

As with the Squire, the italicized modifiers of the Prioress's beauty represent the general rather than the specific.

Details in descriptions of ideal beauty could, of course, make distinctions in classes or types yet still not individualize. In the *Knight's Tale*, for instance, Lygurge and Emetreus both represent ideal manliness, although the particulars of their descriptions suggest symbolically contrastive allegiances; in the *Miller's Tale*, the details in the portraits of Alisoun and Absolom support the parodic intention of the tale by directing Alisoun's ideality to the barnyard and Absolom's ideality to courtly effeminacy.<sup>21</sup> Sometimes an unusual use of detail could charge the expected ideality with ambiguity, as with the portrait of Criseyde toward the end of book five of *Troilus*. In three stanzas of moralized, though unspecific, description of his heroine, whose ostensible inten-

tion is to present an example of ideal womanly beauty, the narrator excepts Criseyde from the convention of ideally beautiful women by telling us that her eyebrows were "joyneden yfere" (813). In a note F. N. Robinson tells us that this particular of joined brows "was held to be a mark of beauty, and sometimes as the sign of a passionate nature" in Greece.<sup>22</sup> Where it appears in descriptions of Criseyde in Dares, Joseph of Exeter, Benoit, and Guido, however, the detail is sometimes used positively and sometimes used to suggest a "lak" in the excellence of the ideal, as it is in Chaucer. Since it is not likely that an audience would know the historical tradition behind the particular of Criseyde's joined brows, it would readily assent to Chaucer's implication that the brows somehow represented an imperfection not in beauty but in character. Unusual or specific physiological particulars represent moral shortcomings and not individuality or uniqueness.

Like the portrait of Criseyde, the portraits in the *General Prologue* use rhetorical *descriptio* in catalogue form to present character. Also in the tradition, the portraits use specific detail for a moral end. For instance, each of Chaucer's lascivious characters, of whom there are many, possesses some physiognomic peculiarity that represents not merely a genetic inheritance but a fault in spiritual condition as well. These characters are "gat-tothed" (468); they have voices "as smal as hath a goot" (688); they sweat profusely, or they have bulging eyes, or wens on their noses. Their faces are pocked or boiled, their hair is limp, or they are bald. The choleric Reeve is skinny and close-shaven, the sanguine Franklin has a white beard and reddish complexion. Oppositely, the portraits of the morally ideal characters, the Knight and the Parson, contain no physical details, although each has identifying appurtenances, like the Knight's stained "habergeon" (77), or the Parson's staff.

Yet, every reader of the *General Prologue* senses that however much the portraits use specific physical detail to suggest moral evaluation, however, much they appear symbolically to represent social types or estates,<sup>23</sup> they transcend the conventional, the typological, the symbolic. Chaucer's style, his organization of particulars, makes the portraits dynamic; it quickens them with a sense of individual life, a life lived, as it were, through time and from which readers want to derive motive and experience to explain character. For instance, we may learn that the Wife of Bath has a literary heritage from La Vieille in *Le Roman de la*



*Rose*, that the fact of her five "housbondes at chirche dore" (460) suggests her figural connection to the Samaritan Woman of the New Testament, and that her wide-set front teeth suggest a problematically energetic libido; we may learn that the Pardoner derives from Faux Semblant in *Le Roman de la Rose* and that the many details in his portrait that suggest his ambiguous sexuality symbolize what has been called "scriptural eunuchry."<sup>24</sup> But our first response is that both characters, to name the two most potentially mimetic portraits, have about them a sense of their own individual history that transcends the conventions or at least makes the corrupt spiritual condition that the conventions suggest less significant to our interest in them than their identity, psychology—their personality.

What is more, once the characters of the portraits become animated in the narrative links that grow out of the *General Prologue*, Chaucer sometimes makes it impossible for us to derive a moral evaluation from the iconographic and symbolic particulars in the portraits, for he gives us historical information that explains the detail literally, as much as the detail may earlier have appeared to be symbolic. For example, early in the portrait of the Wife of Bath, we learn that she is deaf in one ear. Robertson shows that Chaucer uses this detail to suggest that the Wife was a sinner who refused to hear the new music of salvation.<sup>25</sup> As much as this detail may suggest moral evaluation in the portrait, however, it becomes less conclusive as Chaucer develops his portrait into a character. In the prologue to her tale, the Wife tells us that she is deaf because her fifth husband struck her a blow that deprived her of her hearing. To be sure, we do not know this in the *General Prologue*, nor are we surprised, once Jankin hits her, that she grows deaf, since she had refused to listen to him read from his "book of wikked wyves" (3. 685). But if the Wife's deafness originally stands out as a symbol of her sinfulness, Chaucer chooses not to leave the symbolism unattached to an actual explanation for the fact. In consequence, the moral evaluation we may first have made on the basis of the detail in the portrait is ultimately but one element of a complex response. We recognize that the detail may not have been intended simply for moral evaluation, that it is historically explicable.

The example of the Wife of Bath suggests a characteristically Chaucerian mode of operation. Chaucer constructs his portraits of concrete particulars. Because the particulars are conventional, they

suggest symbolic or typological meaning, hence moral evaluation. Yet Chaucer's seemingly random method of structuring his details and his apparent interest in extending the concrete or literal significance of a particular into the links imbues the portraits with a mimetic and dynamic potential suggesting an individual, at times neurotic, psychology with personal motives for actions and attitudes, personal history, and a future. In other words, detail in the portraits can function both as a marker for moral interpretation and as an accident in individual psychology, history, or genetics.

Morality and psychology are not inimical categories in interpretation. But they are usually distinct. Chaucer, however, often suggests both either in a single detail or by coordinating two or more details in a series of couplets. The technique creates irony that ultimately complicates both moral evaluation and character analysis, for it undercuts the quality of absoluteness in each category. The effect on the form of the portraits of this complication is an inconclusiveness akin to the inconclusiveness in the form of Chaucer's earlier works. But, whereas inconclusiveness in the earlier works was in some measure either unintentional or, as in *Troilus*, finally unacceptable, in the portraits of the *General Prologue* it is intentional, created by a conscious poetic technique that undercuts absolute moral evaluation and leaves interpretation open-ended, without the possibility of concluding, without even the need to conclude.

The portrait of the Prioress offers an excellent example of how this intentionally inconclusive structuring works.<sup>26</sup> Chaucer tells us that the Prioress's name is Madame Eglentyne—a sweet-smelling wild rose—which locates her in both religious and courtly traditions for which the rose is a central symbol, but which also ironizes both, since a wild rose is neither the red rose of the courtly tradition nor the white rose of the Marian tradition. The images Chaucer attaches to her throughout her portrait contrast yet unite in ambiguous alliance conventions from both religious and courtly life. About her singing of the religious service, we are told:

Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne,  
Entuned in hir nose ful semely.

[121–22]

The image suggests that she does her religious duty with an eye for fashion, since nasal singing was the current style in Chaucer's time. This is but one of many images, like the Prioress's "pynched" wimple (151), her rosary "gauded al with grene" (159), and the remarkably ambiguous brooch she uses for costume jewelry (160-62), which align yet contrast the religious and courtly conventions that compose her portrait. On a larger scale within the portrait, but to the same ironic and ambiguous effect, are the couplets that contrast the Prioress's fastidious table manners, perhaps the most trivial expression of courtly sensibility, with her "conscience," her charity, and her pity, qualities expected of a nun. Having composed the images of her courtliness by a simple coordinative syntax, Chaucer turns from the courtly to the Christian elements of her conscience with the emphatic use of the negative "but," suggesting that the lines following will negate by contrast the lines preceding them. What follows, however, is a facetious listing of more triviality, this time more egregious because the sphere of interest is religious, not courtly. The Prioress weeps out of charity and pity when she sees mice caught in traps or when her pampered and perhaps illegally kept dogs are beaten. Because the triviality of her charity is of a piece with the triviality of her courtliness, the coordinate "but" does not contrast good against bad—as it will do in the portrait of the Parson. Rather, the word functions to subordinate another set of details of similar effect to those that preceded it. When Chaucer turns again from her "conscience and tendre herte" (150) to describe her face and costume according to expected courtly rhetorical conventions, we do not feel that we are moving into yet another set of conventions, but rather that we are continuing the original set in the same manner.

Chaucer clearly did not intend to place the Prioress in a simple moral category representing either an inappropriate nun with misguided spirituality or a courtly lady *manquée* with trivial aspirations. Rather, he wanted her to exist ambiguously before us, all sides of her nature, her courtliness and her Christianity, equally trivial. The conventions from the one undercut yet extend the conventions of the other. Both sides of her identity are finally of little substance, yet ironically, perhaps even tragically, the Prioress reveals them because she wants to

appear "digne of reverence" and "estatliche of manere" (140-41). Chaucer leaves her portrait purposely inconclusive by alternating elements from the two life-styles she expresses, which produces a sense in us that the Prioress is deficient both as a nun and as a courtly lady. But this complexity leads beyond simple moral judgment; it produces a psychological picture of a woman whose frustrations lead her to over-sentimentalize her charity and perhaps to overeat—Chaucer uses the adverb "ful" nine times in his description of her and tells us that "hardily, she was nat undergrowe" (156).

The characteristics that Chaucer catalogues for us in his portrait of the Prioress, conventional as they are, hold the potential for later, more specific and individual character development along psychological lines that absorb, if they do not preclude, moral judgment. Whatever is sadistic, bloody, or sentimental in the tale she later tells, whatever is bathetic in its identification with the "litel" child and his suffering mother, whatever is shocking in the Old Testament judgmentalism of her story about a Christian martyr and in her presentation of the Virgin as one who "ravyshedest" the Holy Spirit "doun fro the Deitee" (7. 469), has plausible motivation from the portrait Chaucer draws of her in the *General Prologue*.

Like the portrait of the Prioress, all the portraits of the *General Prologue* juxtapose conventional details from different, often incongruous, modes of life that produce a double sense that most pilgrims are at once types and individuals. Since the catalogue convinces by the accretion of particulars, Chaucer simply lines up details and images in his portraits. He ties together details in loose coordination, using "and" to summarize or "but" to contrast them. At times he uses the slightly more subordinating "for" to suggest a causal connection between particulars, as in the portrait of the Friar (218, 220, 225, 227, 229). Basically, he coordinates details within a couplet, in which case the rhyme controls the effect, or from couplet to couplet. Most characteristic about the syntactic organization of detail in the portraits is its skillfully random effect, its apparent lack of order and control, which creates irony and humor, seems stylistically appropriate to a recollection of the past, and suggests a sense that conclusive moral evaluation is not possible.

### III

Chaucer creates inconclusiveness in the forms of the portraits of the *General Prologue* in three specific ways. He disarranges the expected order of detail so that the character-types common to catalogue description elsewhere become individuated, potentially dynamic and mimetic instead of static and typical. He repeats words, phrases, or images from portrait to portrait, so that their context alters their connotation. And he uses double entendre to create ambiguity and often unresolvable contradiction. However, since Chaucer the pilgrim mediates our recognition of Chaucer the poet's techniques, let us get to his poet through his pilgrim, whose subjective approach to description and refusal to judge at once increase our sense of a free flow of associated particulars and intensify our sense of inconclusiveness.<sup>27</sup>

The pilgrim Chaucer intends to be an impressionistic journalist. He will describe the other pilgrims according to the way they seemed—"so as it semed me" (39). And they all seem just fine. Adjectives like "worthy," "good," "fair," "noble," "gentil," "solempne" abound throughout the portraits, as do phrases like "noon hym like" (Physician), "no man nowhere so virtuous" (Friar), and "ful riche of excellence" (Sergeant of Law). The pilgrim Chaucer likes most all his companions and agrees with all their opinions (except the Summoner's on excommunication), either by assenting openly to a pilgrim's opinion, as with the Monk, or by praising the actions of each pilgrim even when those actions are reprehensible, as with the Physician and the Pardoner. As a journalist, the pilgrim Chaucer shows an indiscriminating enthusiasm for what he thinks to be an abundance of talent and excellence among the pilgrims.

The pilgrim's refusal to criticize—in fact, his apparent commitment to praise—forces us to make our own sense out of the particulars in the portraits, especially the incongruous ones, and finally to evaluate the character for ourselves. This couplet from the Wife of Bath's portrait is a stunning example of the pilgrim's technique and its effect:

She was a worthy womman al hir live  
Housbondes at chirche door she hadde fyve.

[459–60]

In the space of one couplet, we see the Wife's femininity praised because she has fulfilled herself as a woman by having had five husbands. We are left to judge whether or not "husbandizing" perfects the worth of a woman. Similarly, the following paired couplets from the portrait of the Physician exemplify the technique more expansively:

Of his diete mesurable was he,  
 For it was of no superfluitee,  
 But of greet norissyng and digestible.  
 His studie was but litel on the Bible.

[435-38]

Without the narrator's moral consciousness—in fact, because of his exuberant praise of most actions—the reader is led into the poet's ironic trap, recognizing on the one hand that the ingenuous pilgrim is limited in his perception, and on the other that his very charitable, if simplistic, approach to the world is nonetheless a good value to which all good Christians must pay attention.

A more-developed case in point is in the portrait of the Monk, whose manliness and venereal pursuits at once qualify him to be an abbot and yet disqualify him from being a good monk. As with the Prioress, the Monk's portrait is constructed of competing sets of details from the courtly—in this case the chivalric—world, and from the monastic Christian world.<sup>28</sup> Neither side ever gets the upper hand, and when the pilgrim openly agrees with the Monk's refusal to follow the rules of monastic life—"and I seyde his opinion was good" (183)—we, who have been critical because he had not fulfilled his vows, must consider with the pilgrim whether the rules are not after all too stringent, whether a man of the Monk's physical stature and drive might not need "the space" of holding "to the newe world" (176). When we reach the question "How shal the world be served?" (187), we recognize that we have been trapped, for we know that a monk's role is not to serve the world but to serve God; yet we also know that there is something valuable about a man of the Monk's virility serving the world—Harry Bailly will later comment on it with considerable envy (7. 1932-62). Chaucer the pilgrim's commitment to praise the characters who emerge from Chaucer the poet's technique of combining details with frequently contradictory implications produces the

complex characterizations that, as Muscatine points out, "on a large scale disarrange and make quasi-dramatic the sequence of tales as a whole."<sup>29</sup>

The several stylistic devices that create such complexity of characterization in the individual portraits also create the dynamism felt among and through all portraits taken as a whole. Chaucer, working through his pilgrim character, charges words and phrases in one portrait with another connotative sense in another. He rings changes on the meaning of terms while creating a connection from portrait to portrait between the standards and values that the terms represent. Thus he creates an ironic interchange between us and two or more characters within the portrait gallery. The most obvious example of this technique is in the repetition and development of the word *worthy*, introduced in the first line of the Knight's portrait and emphasized throughout it, so that the word comes to signify the virtuous quality Chaucer wants us most to respect in the Knight. By the time we reach the Merchant's portrait, where the term appears three times to suggest the Merchant's financial concerns as opposed to the Knight's virtue, Chaucer has already changed the connotation of "worthy" in the portrait of the Friar, who is interested in "worthy women of the toun" (217), women of wealth, who is himself "swich a worthy man" (243) because it

Acorded nat, as by his facultee,  
To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce.

[244-45]

The Friar is worthy because his interest is in places "ther as profit sholde arise" (249).

Chaucer accomplishes the same kind of ironic effect and dramatic result when he repeats a line from one portrait in another portrait. In the portrait of the Squire, he balances the gently patronizing humor that the pilgrim creates in his description of the Squire with the remarkably dignified final couplet that makes unimportant the "litel space" (87) of the Squire's military experience:

Curteis he was, lowely, and servysable,  
And carf biforn his fader at the table.

[99-100]

When he repeats the line about courtesy in the new context of the Friar's portrait, it sounds unctuous, obscene, and sarcastic:

And over al, ther as profit sholde arise,  
 Curteis he was and lowely of servyse.  
 There nas no man nowher so vertuous.  
 He was the beste beggere in his house.

[249-52]

Yet the repetition of most of the line from the more idealized Squire's portrait in the Friar's portrait makes us wonder what courtesy really means. A similar intrusion occurs when, after the pilgrim has called the Knight "a verray, parfit gentil knyght" (72), in praise of his spiritual nature, he calls the Physician "a verray, parfit praktisour" (422), in praise of his materialism.

Finally, Chaucer's brilliant use of double entendre, perhaps his most outstanding stylistic technique in the portraits, conflates into one line or into a couplet or two competing, even discordant, details that charge the portraits with the paradox of ethical contradiction. I have already quoted the couplet about the Wife of Bath's worthiness as a woman. To this may be added the line "She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye" (467), which brings together in one ambiguous image the Wife's sensuality and her spiritual penchant for visiting religious shrines throughout Europe. Or, the line that combines her wealth and her competitiveness by emphasizing that if any woman in her parish were allowed to go to the "offering" before her, then "she was out of alle charitee" (452). Chaucer's remark that the Monk is "a manly man, to been an abbot able" (167) connects surprisingly the Monk's masculinity with his religious calling. The obscene remark bringing together the Friar's linguistic facility and his lasciviousness is a less terse example:

In alle the ordres foure is noon that kan  
 So muchel of daliaunce and fair langage.  
 He hadde maad ful many a mariage  
 Of yonge wommen at his owene cost.  
 Unto his ordre he was a noble post.

[210-14]

The Sergeant of Law "war and wys" (309), who "semed bisier than he



was" (322), uses his great learning and wisdom to purchase outright, hence without record of his possibly shady dealings:

Al was fee symple to hym in effect;  
His purchasyng myghte nat been infect.

[319-20]

The three lines concluding the portrait of the Physician align that character's pharmaceutical interest in soluble powdered gold and his interest in money by the implication that plagues are economically good for the medical business:

He kept that he wan in pestilence,  
For gold in phisik is a cordial;  
Therefore he lovede gold in special.

[442-44]

The list of examples can be extended, for double entendre represents one of Chaucer's most basic techniques for energizing by compression the sometimes contradictory lists of qualities that catalogue description required of him.<sup>30</sup>

Chaucer effected in the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales* a most unusual and complex form of description. Working within the tradition of rhetorical *descriptio*, listing qualities in the form of a catalogue, but using a journalistic, noncritical, and loosely coordinated hypotactic style, he created a set of portraits at once morally symbolic in traditional ways and capable of energetic and psychologically mimetic development. The conventionalism of the portraits derives from traditional methods of description, yet his organization of these symbolic details within each portrait and his alignment of noncontiguous elements from different modes of life and with different expectations express an individuation unknown to, and unexpected from, the tradition. In the portraits Chaucer creates characters who rest in a middle state, a state between the static, the exemplary, and the dynamic, even the mimetic. It is up to the narrative links that follow the *General Prologue* and to the tales themselves, which represent in some ways the moral and psychological values of the pilgrims we meet in the portraits, to show whether Chaucer will move to a mimetic fiction or remain traditionally in an exemplary one. When the narrator completes

his portrait gallery, the character-types of the portraits are, like the narrator himself, "redy to wenden" (21) on their own pilgrimage.

Yet, because the form of the *Canterbury Tales* is both unique for Chaucer and unique in the literature that Chaucer knew, the poet had no compositional model; he had to go it alone as he worked out his plans for its organization and meaning. His progress throughout the tales was not linear. He knew where he wanted to start and where he wanted to end. The progress of the geographical journey may have represented the structural arch. But he clearly did not understand how to follow that arch and what to say as he went. Without a model, but with the ambivalence about meaning that seems as much a part of Chaucer the poet as it is of Chaucer the persona and narrator, it is no wonder that the *Canterbury Tales* is fragmented in the way that it is. The outer form of the *Tales* enabled Chaucer to solve the epistemological problems his earlier poems had confronted. But before his composite form could express pluralistic opinion as its own end, he would have to make the outer and inner forms interpenetrate so that they appeared to be one, and he would have to vary the storial materials of the inner form so that the meaning of one tale in context of another would appear inconclusive. How Chaucer went about these tasks will be the subject of the next chapter.

## VI. "After my Lawe": Inconclusiveness and the Fragmentary Nature of the *Canterbury Tales*



Inconclusiveness sustains the poetics of the *Canterbury Tales*. It underlies the numerous fictional voices that relate the outer and inner forms, and it motivates Chaucer's method of composing in fragments. Although I shall not discuss the meaning of any tale specifically, except when it is relevant to my argument

about the entire work, inconclusiveness also charges the content (thematics) of the *Canterbury Tales* with the energy of paradox.<sup>1</sup> Thus it functions both as a principle of structure and as a tactic to control meaning.

A mass of discrete storial narratives makes up the inner form of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is commonly assumed that Chaucer composed some stories, like the tales by the Knight, the Monk, and the Second Nun, before he composed the *Canterbury Tales* as a single work, presumably not conceiving a pilgrim's voice to speak these tales but later assigning a fictional teller to them. Other tales, like those by the Canon's Yeoman and the Pardoner, so thoroughly depend on the fictional consciousnesses of their tellers that Chaucer must surely have written them in his characters' voices. Yet, whether Chaucer conceived first of tale, first of teller, or of the two inseparably, he intended every storial narrative of the *Canterbury Tales* ultimately to have a fictional voice different from his own, a voice spoken by one of the characters on the pilgrimage. He never accomplished this intention completely. The voices in about one-fourth of the tales cannot be identified clearly with the attitudes or the values of the pilgrims who tell them. In the *Shipman's Tale*, for example, the narrator says little to suggest that he is the Shipman of the *General Prologue*. In consequence, the *Canterbury Tales*, despite its many coherent virtues, is not fully realized. Nonetheless, as in Chaucer's earlier works, but on a vaster scale, narrative voice in the *Canterbury Tales* controls meaning.

In all cases before the *Canterbury Tales*, the speaker had been the poet himself, either as persona in a dream experience or as a translator of another author's text. He had sought to tell his dream "aryght" (HF, 79), to render facts correctly, and to direct meaning in the experience toward its appropriately moral end. But the literary materials that the speaker rendered rarely gave the simple answers he wanted. More often than not, they left him in a state of confusion, as in the *House of Fame*, or of dissatisfaction, as in the *Parliament of Fowls*. Both states even reappear periodically in *Troilus* and the *Legend of Good Women*. In the *Canterbury Tales*, however, Chaucer frees himself from the earnest persona, who previously had been unable to make his information fit an expected system. He invents fictional tellers on a purported journey, makes himself merely one more teller, separating himself from the burden of writing with a univocal moral goal. He simply reports what each said, "everich a word" (1. 733). With such a new form, Chaucer can now think about the multifaceted implications of fiction without suffering the anxiety of didactic responsibility. Perhaps he thought as follows: "Let a miller tell a ribald story, a squire be interested in talking birds; let a manciple render Ovid, a physician translate Livy; let a nun translate a saint's life and a prioress tell a miracle of the Virgin. I will play my part by parodying the silly metrical romances and by parodying myself as the inept poet for whom I have become known; if that tour-de-force should fail, I will turn dutifully to my other literary role in life, that of translator, and I will translate an important moral text about the virtue of prudence. This course is itself most prudent, for though I cannot be a poet as is the moral Gower, I can poetize nonetheless."

In his new form, Chaucer could experiment with the kinds of meaning that different genres, modes, and voices could express. Certainly aware since the *House of Fame* of the limited truth-value in literary expression, Chaucer could translate or invent many kinds of stories in the *Canterbury Tales* that claimed to represent some truth about the nature of the world and about man's goals, yet that paradoxically remained mere opinions because their narrators were limited. These fictions may have contained a clearly readable didactic pulse elsewhere in a source, like that part of Nicholas Trivet's *Les Chroniques écrites pour Marie d'Angleterre* that is the source for the *Man of Law's Tale*.<sup>2</sup> In the *Canterbury Tales*, however, a character like the Man of Law

recalls the fiction and projects his own values through the story.<sup>3</sup> Thus the tellers color meaning in the tales, at times in peculiar ways. The characters on the pilgrimage tell stories merely to pass the time and to win a prize; Chaucer tells stories that reveal in their course the spiritual or psychological "condicioun" of the tellers and suggest, in effect, that a narrative consciousness different from the author's must limit the truth-value a story can express.

Discounting the problem tales, whose problems no doubt result from the incomplete state of the work, I believe that in the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer imbued the fictions of the inner form with the voices of characters or personalities developed in the outer form. During the last two decades, researchers have shown this practice to be more closely related to learned rhetorical methods of composition than to a "dramatic principle," an innate drive to represent and interpret perceived reality.<sup>4</sup> But the source of this practice is less important to this argument than its effect—the creation of a composite narrative form at once dynamic and inconclusive because personalities of the outer form suffuse the fictions of the inner form. Each tale of the inner form, an independent fiction with an assumed omniscient narrator, becomes, in context of the other tales, an opinion. Even the Knight's and the Parson's tales become mere examples of stories that express their tellers' values and needs, not Chaucer's, not the reader's, not the other pilgrims'. The existence of all the tales in context of each other makes both a former and a later statement seem partial. Thus the *Canterbury Tales* experiments with the power of opinion and the limits of meaning.

Chaucer achieves this kind of inconclusive form by creating an interchange between the outer and inner forms of the work in both obvious and subtle ways. The most obvious way is by creating a dynamic in the outer form that the tales of the inner form intensify and complicate, as when the Reeve and the Summoner respond with fictions to the Miller and the Friar respectively, when the characters of the "Marriage Group" respond in some way to the Wife of Bath, when the Franklin responds to the Squire, when the Miller tells a story "to quite" the Knight's story, and when the Nun's Priest tells a tale in response to the *Monk's Tale*, echoing through its course the *Prioress's Tale*. This dynamic contributes to the inconclusiveness of the entire form because these tales, responses to the values of other tellers and

tales, attack, undermine, correct, or develop the themes of the tales to which they are responses, making the values within those tales, as well as within their own, appear partial or inadequate.

Chaucer also achieves inconclusiveness by matching a teller's psychology with his tale's theme in three-quarters of the tales, or, to put the matter another way, by using the fictions as projections of his tellers' attitudes. Few of us, for example, doubt the motivation between character and tale in the cases of the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath.<sup>5</sup> However, motivation exists between most of the characters and their tales, so that the tale represents not only the values of a social type, like a Franklin or a Miller, for which the conventions of typology would function simply to describe moral universals, but a personal psychology often working curiously to extend meaning. Two examples will have to stand for many.

The *Reeve's Tale* is not merely a story a low-class Reeve might tell, not even a story that merely punishes a miller for the supposed insult of Robin the Miller's story. It incorporates as well the anger and self-hatred at being old and impotent that the Reeve's prologue raises from implicit indications in his portrait in the *General Prologue*. Oswald's attitude turns a simple fabliau plot into a dark, mean, and cruel story about vengeance, self-hatred, and bestial sexuality that punishes Oswald for a condition he cannot abide in himself, a condition not relevant to Robin the Miller, as he has been presented to us, and not explained by a vice typologically expected of a Reeve.

The effect of the *Merchant's Tale* is more complicated because the *General Prologue* leads us to expect in the tale the manifestation of a vice related to the Merchant's concern about "th' encreses of his wyynyng" (1. 275). But Chaucer does not develop the related particulars about the Merchant's profiteering, unless marriage is understood to be related to profit; instead the Merchant becomes one of the tellers in the "Marriage Group." In his prologue he tells us that his wife "is a shrewe at al" who could "overmacche" the devil if he "to hir ycoupled were" (4. 1218-22). He also says that he will not tell a tale "of myn owene soore" (4. 1243), then presents a mordant examination of the folly that occurs when "tendre youthe hath wedded stoupyng age" (4. 1738). The tale reveals to us what the prologue and the portrait withhold, a complex relationship between marriage, youth, age, and sexual

appetite that suggests retrospectively why the Merchant condemns both his wife and marriage after only two months.

The highly developed characterization of the Reeve in the prologue to the *Reeve's Tale* extends the psychological dimensions of meaning in his tale. Oppositely, the complexly represented materials of the *Merchant's Tale* enrich our understanding of the Merchant in his prologue. The relationship between the teller of the outer form and the tale of the inner form creates in the *Canterbury Tales* a series of self-revelations of which the characters themselves are not necessarily aware.<sup>6</sup> If tales by characters such as the Reeve and the Merchant represent deep psychological motives of which the tellers are not aware, then what they suggest about the typological "condicioun" of the teller is continually complicated by our deeper understanding of their psychological "condicioun."<sup>7</sup>

The third and final example of how Chaucer creates inconclusiveness through an interchange of outer and inner forms in the *Canterbury Tales* is more radical than the other two, for it represents not an interchange but an interpenetration between the two fictional planes of the composite form whereby inner and outer forms are no longer distinguishable. As a general rule, Chaucer distinguishes between his inner and outer forms in the *Canterbury Tales*; hence he forces his reader to infer from a tale, a separate fiction, the values and motives that the character of the outer form represents. He distinguishes between a prologue, a statement generally about self in the outer form, and a character's tale, a story about the world in the inner form through which that character projects his or her values. Although the manuscripts are not unanimous in their handling of rubrics, they generally follow what I assume to have been Chaucer's own practice of separating by headnotes the tales from each other, from prologues and epilogues, and from interchanges between two or more characters. Yet in those prologues and tales where self-revelation is most explicit, the distinctions between inner and outer forms of the *Canterbury Tales* curiously disappear.

The Pardoner and his tale represent the most outstanding case in point. At first we find much mediation: an introduction in which the Pardoner tells us he is going to think "upon som honest thyng" (6. 328); a prologue in which he tells us with stunning honesty how

corrupt and hypocritical he is; and a sermon-like tale in which he exemplifies in a story the corruptions of which he has confessed himself to be guilty. But the tale does not come to an end in its expected place or manner, as we find in other tales, nor does a headnote indicate a movement to an epilogue or end-link. During the Pardoner's recital of his sermon in story form, which he knows "al by rote" (6. 332), the boundary between the tale with its moral goal and the performance with its profit motive merge within the Pardoner's consciousness so that he seems to forget where he is and falls into his own fiction. When he has completed his sermon-tale and his benediction, he turns immediately to Harry Bailly and the other pilgrims as if they were his audience of "lewed" people, presumably convinced that he has hoodwinked them by his brusque honesty. The effect of this fluid interchange between inner and outer forms produces one of the most intensely dramatic moments in the entire *Canterbury Tales*. Harry Bailly feels threatened and responds by insulting the Pardoner violently. The insult is effective, for the Pardoner, previously voluble and glib, secure in the power of his words to control the reality around him, is struck dumb—"This Pardoner answerde nat a word" (6. 956).

Chaucer creates a similar effect with the Wife of Bath. In some senses fact and fiction merge in her presentation of herself since her autobiography *is* her tale. She tells us that her poetic is to "speke after my fantasye" (3. 190), and while drifting through nostalgic reminiscences, she catches herself up and returns to her structured history:

But now, sire, lat me se, what I shal seyn?  
Aha! by God, I have my tale ageyn.

[3. 585-86]

So beguiled are we by the liveliness of the Wife's prologue, we need to be reminded by the Friar at its end—an end that concludes with a prayer like so many of the tales proper—that this was indeed a preamble to a tale and not a tale itself. Although the rubrics of, say, the Ellesmere Manuscript make clear at this point that the Wife's prologue is ended and her tale is about to begin, there is a sense that the story following the Wife's "preamble of a tale" is yet one more example, relevant to the first, of the Wife's personal story of the woes in mar-



riage. It may even have been this sense that a character's history could itself be a tale that made Chaucer tamper with the Wife's actual tale, shifting to the Shipman what is commonly believed to have been her first tale and eventually supplying her with another one that fit the character more tightly.<sup>8</sup> Whatever Chaucer's reasons, it is clear that the Pardoner thinks her autobiography is a tale. Early in the wife's prologue, he says, after she has threatened him, "as ye bigan, / Telle forth youre tale" (3. 185-86). To this she replies: "Now, sire, now wol I telle forth my tale" (3. 193), and she returns to tell the history of her marriages.

The places where Chaucer obliterates the expected fictional distinctions between the inner and outer forms of the *Canterbury Tales* are, admittedly, few. Aside from the two already discussed, there is only the peculiar fact that the first part of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* is actually the Canon Yeoman's professional autobiography and not his fiction.<sup>9</sup> In kind, it is like the prologues to the tales by the Reeve, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner. This kind of obliteration, confusing, of fictional boundaries seems to be one of Chaucer's experimental methods for creating fluidity between the two components of his composite form, a method by which he tests how far he can proceed in the direction of making the voice of the outer form penetrate the fiction of the inner form, or vice versa. In effect it intensifies a reader's sense that the stories are fictive projections of the characters on the pilgrimage and provides the *Canterbury Tales* with a mimetic potential found nowhere else in the encyclopedic forms of stories popular in the Middle Ages, both of which contribute to the inconclusiveness of the entire form by making meaning partial, equivocal, inextricably an element of the limited consciousnesses of those characters purported to have been on the journey to Canterbury.

Inconclusiveness is not related only to the mimetic potential with which Chaucer imbues the form of the *Canterbury Tales*, however. It is an element of the work's structure, a principle by which Chaucer composes and with which he can explore and test the manifold ways fiction can represent reality. It is, then, both a principle and a method of composition. Chaucer not only composed the *Canterbury Tales* in fragments; he "fragmentized" meaning within each fragment. In order to understand the principle, let us look at the method.

## II

What can we know about how Chaucer composed his massive and complex *Canterbury Tales* when we do not have his workbooks or his plans? We do not even have the text he himself wrote. The different groups of manuscripts disagree on the order of the fragments, and the most authoritative manuscripts of the most authoritative group, the Ellesmere and the Hengwrt, even disagree on the content. The Hengwrt, for instance, contains neither the prologue to the *Merchant's Tale* nor the Canon's Yeoman's prologue and tale. Despite the admittedly serious drawbacks that the lack of an original text presents, however, two characteristics of Chaucer's compositional method emerge. First, although the order of the fragments within the manuscripts varies and the materials of each fragment occasionally differ, the fragment itself appears to be the basic unit of composition. It represents something like Chaucer's own habit or idea of construction, the one his literary executors, presumably following his wishes, passed on to the scribes. Second, Chaucer customarily constructed his fragmentary units to include tales on varied themes or points of view. As a general rule, he did not allow the meaning implied by one tale in a fragment to stand without countering, altering, or in some way enriching it by the implied meaning of a companion or companions.

No matter how our modern editions vary in their ordering, the *Canterbury Tales* exists as a group of ten fragments.<sup>10</sup> One fragment, number seven, contains six tales but only five tellers. Two, numbers one and three, contain three tales each; of these, fragment one also contains the *General Prologue*, assuring it of first place in the order, and a brief fragment by the Cook. Four fragments, numbers four, five, six, and eight, contain two tales each and constitute the largest number of similarly structured fragments. Finally, three fragments, numbers two, nine, and ten, contain only one tale each, except that fragment ten also contains the retraction, which assures it of ultimate place in the order, especially since the retraction exists in every manuscript where the *Parson's Tale* is complete. Seven of the ten fragments, then, contain more than one tale; of the remaining three, there is evidence that Chaucer was working on extending two of them to in-

clude at least one more tale. Let us examine briefly what evidence the fragments with only one tale offer that Chaucer considered extending them to include at least one more tale.

Fragment two contains an epilogue in which the Host asks the Parson to tell a tale after the Man of Law has finished his tale. When the Parson refuses, either the Shipman, the Squire or the Summoner—the manuscripts vary<sup>11</sup>—asserts that his "joly body schal a tale telle" (2. 1185). Although Robinson tells us that there is manuscript support for the theory "that Chaucer abandoned the Epilogue," its existence shows Chaucer's intention, at one point in the development of the *Canterbury Tales*, of offering at least one more tale in this fragment, one that would contrast the morally tendentious tale of the Man of Law in a way that a tale by the Parson could not. The epilogue and the curious prologue to the *Man of Law's Tale* suggest that this is the least "finished" fragment of the ten, the one whose form is least clear.<sup>12</sup> But in it we nonetheless can see evidence that Chaucer considered using at least two kinds of contrasting fictions.<sup>13</sup>

It is interesting to speculate that Chaucer planned a similar contrasting structure for fragment nine. The prologue to the *Manciple's Tale* introduces dramatic materials which suggest that Chaucer may once have intended to juxtapose the Manciple's story of Phoebus and the crow with a tale from the Cook. The fragment opens with Harry first calling upon the Cook to tell a tale—"he knoweth his penaunce" (9. 12), but the Cook cannot respond because he is asleep. Whereupon the Manciple offers to tell a tale, but not before he ridicules the Cook. Chaucer is establishing here the familiar dramatic situation of having Harry call upon one teller only to have another teller preempt his choice. In fact, after the Manciple berates the awakened Cook, Harry warns him that the Cook might choose "another day" (9. 71) to reveal things about him that "were nat honest, if it cam to preef" (9. 75). In response to this statement, the Manciple retracts his insult, recognizing that the Cook might "lightly brynge me in the snare" (9. 77). He offers the Cook some wine, then tells a tale about why it is best to keep silent.<sup>14</sup> The content of the prologue to the *Manciple's Tale* suggests that Chaucer created this altercation to motivate a second tale by the Cook. The design resembles the pattern of altercations he already had

created between the Miller and the Reeve and between the Friar and Summoner.

Even if the speculation should prove unconvincing, the first line of fragment ten, which follows the *Manciple's Tale* and also contains but one tale (plus the retraction), indicates that Chaucer wanted to make a contrastive connection between the materials he finished before he stopped writing. The last fragment begins: "By that the Maunciple hadde his tale al ended" (10. 1). Evidently Chaucer intended a temporal relationship between these two last fragments, the one following immediately upon the preceding one. In effect, therefore, he wanted the two tales by the Manciple and the Parson to be seen in contrast.

Although the prologue to the last tale connects it to the fragment before, there is no indication, as in the other two fragments containing single tales, that Chaucer considered adding another tale. The position of the *Parson's Tale* at the end and the nature of its subject matter suggest a special consideration for it. It is conceived as a singularly important statement of man's spiritual purpose in life, intended "to knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende" (10. 47). It turns our attention to salvation, the main spiritual goal of European life in the fourteenth century. The Parson's treatise on sin and repentance represents an orthodox view of the world and of man's function in it. It was neither given to Chaucer's age, nor to Chaucer, to question or undercut the orthodoxy that the *Parson's Tale* represents. Whatever peculiar angle of devotion—Lollard or otherwise—this meditation might represent, the main lines of it respond to all that has come before in the *Canterbury Tales* with an earnest religious answer (and without the complication by personal motive one would expect from a fourteenth-century book about the nature of the world). Its existence in a fragment without other opinions in the forms of tales, but with Chaucer's own retraction, seems both appropriate and just. The fact that fragment ten contains only one tale, however, does not invalidate my argument about Chaucer's "fragmentizing" method since even fragment ten has a binary structure, if we consider Chaucer's retraction.

My purpose in discussing the three single-tale fragments has been to delineate a potential pattern of composition similar to the compositional pattern of the other fragments. In the *Canterbury Tales*, seven of the ten

fragments contain at least two tellers and two tales; of the remaining three fragments, two contain materials for possible development into fragments of more than one teller and tale, and one opens by referring to a tale in the fragment before it. The evidence is overwhelming that Chaucer's compositional method was "fragmentizing," dialectically presenting in each fragment one valence—an issue, an opinion, an attitude, or a theme—and at least one counter or alternate valence. By such a method, he either limited authority or extended possibility in each of the fragments, and hence structured the *Canterbury Tales* by a principle of inconclusiveness that implied pluralism of opinion as its end.

This principle of inconclusiveness has even motivated the enormous critical drive to establish unity in the *Canterbury Tales*. The complicated diversity of themes and subjects without a clear architectonics, as in the *Divine Comedy*, challenges readers to order and organize meaning where Chaucer does not. We have been treated to arguments on the unity of the entire *Canterbury Tales*,<sup>15</sup> the unity of fragment one,<sup>16</sup> of fragment seven,<sup>17</sup> and of fragment eight;<sup>18</sup> there has also been an argument relating the thematics of fragment six to fragment five;<sup>19</sup> and there have been many arguments relating the fragments that comprise the "Marriage Group,"<sup>20</sup> commonly thought to include fragments three, four, and five, but to exclude the tales by the Friar, the Summoner, and the Squire within the fragments. No argument to my knowledge has ever been advanced about the unity of fragment six, despite many excellent analyses of each of the tales as independent entities. Yet such an argument could be made.

The tales by the Physician and the Pardoner, which make up fragment six, are unified by a common assumption about how language means. Both the Physician and the Pardoner invert the dichotomy between substance and accident by taking accident for substance. The canny Pardoner tells us he understands both the dichotomy and the inversion when he says:

Thise cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde,  
And turnen substaunce into accident,  
To fulfille al thy likerous talent!

Howard's analysis of the Pardoner and his tale has shown clearly how transposing the spiritual matter of salvation with the material matter of profit ultimately brings about the Pardoner's humiliation.<sup>21</sup> A similar principle of inversion without the undoing of the teller works implicitly in the *Physician's Tale*, which precedes the *Pardoner's Tale* in the fragment. The Physician tells a seemingly moral tale about false judges and contrasts it to the powerful bond between father and daughter, wherein true judgment is implied.<sup>22</sup> A long introduction describes Nature's role in making creatures and the role of governesses and parents in nurturing them. The brief narrative then dwells upon the dilemma Virginius faces when Apius and his henchman plan to debauch his namesake Virginia, hence ruin the reputation of both father and daughter. After establishing that Virginia was "flored in virginitie," chaste "as wel in goost as body" (6. 43-44), the narrator describes how Virginius interprets Virginia's chaste spiritual condition in terms of the physical condition of virginity. In defense against Apius's desire "in lecherie to lyven" (6. 206) with Virginia, Virginius beheads her:

Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente,  
And to the juge he gan it to presente.

[6. 255-56]

Virginius deprives his daughter of her maiden's head in order to save her maidenhead. He presents the one to the judge who desires the other. Like its companion in the fragment, the *Physician's Tale* offers an example of the devastating effect of taking accident for substance. The inconclusiveness of the fragment lies in the ambivalent response readers feel. The Physician tells a story that he believes describes virtue defeating vice while we wonder how the means has justified the end. The Pardoner, a "ful vicious man" by his own admission, tells a "moral tale" (6. 459-60) whose end is material gain. Both tellers consistently reverse Saint Paul's dictum that the letter slayeth but the spirit giveth life, yet each in his own way proves the dictum right.

Like fragment six, each fragment of binary structure presents a tale upon a certain theme and follows it with a tale that develops that theme in another, sometimes contrary, direction. The second response invariably derives from the first, but the nature of its thrust is so different

that the second statement complicates the meaning of the first. The fragment becomes inconclusive by virtue of its mere placement in context of its companion. In fragment eight, for instance, both the tales by the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman deal with the idea of "business" and the profit derived from it. By a single-minded faith that borders on spiritual obstinacy, Cecilia multiplies the number of souls saved. The Canon's Yeoman by contrast, seeks to inspire matter, transform and "multiplie" the worthless to the precious with the frustrating result that he is left black in the face. The order of reading, from the *Second Nun's Tale* to the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, however, reveals the theme of business, profit and "multiplicacion," unusually, for the first story is actually a simply told Saint's Life devoid of the explicit alchemical metaphor. Only by the retrospective contrast of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, which follows it, does the literal story of Saint Cecilia assume the metaphorical richness we understand it to carry. In this way its structure is like fragment six, whose overall meaning works by a retrospective contrast.

Fragments four and five also deal with two versions of the same theme, each version enriching the other by contrast and complicating our understanding of the theme. Because these fragments form the second and third parts of the "Marriage Group," we rarely consider them as independent units. When so considered, their forms appear to be related by virtue of their binary structure and different from the form of fragment three, which inaugurates the subject of marriage but is constructed in a very different way. Let us look first at these binary fragments of the "Marriage Group."

Both the tales by the Clerk and the Merchant in fragment four are without doubt about the condition of marriage, and both refer to the Wife of Bath, who began the debate in fragment three. But the tales within this fragment also have a relationship in common beyond their considerations of marriage. Their common theme is the willfulness of men. Both tales, quite different in form, genre, and tone, present versions of willfulness in men and examine its effects, the former on the world within Walter's control, the latter on January himself.

The *Clerk's Tale* examines Walter's willful testing of Griselde's promise "nevere willyngly, / in werk ne thought," to "disobeye" (4. 362-63). The clerk repeatedly criticizes the extent and severity of

Walter's testing. He even explains it in terms of psychological obsession:

But ther been folk of swich condicion  
That whan they have a certain purpos take,  
They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,  
But, right as they were bounden to a stake,  
They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.  
Right so this markys fulliche hath purposed  
To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed.

[4. 701-7]

The tale concludes by openly calling intolerable the relationship between dominance and submission that the narrative has described; instead it calls for a symbolic interpretation:

This storie is seyde, nat for that wyves sholde  
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,  
For it were inportable, though they wolde;  
But for that every wight, in his degree,  
Sholde be constant in adversitee.

[4. 1142-46]

The *Merchant's Tale* approaches the issue of willfulness differently, suggesting that willfulness is endlessly tolerable as long as it is directed at the self, that is, as long as January blinds himself to the truth that his senses apprehend and his reason offers. "Ye algate in it wente! . . . He swyved thee, I saugh it with myne yen," (4. 2376-78), January exclaims to May in the pear tree. Yet he accepts her judgment that "Ye han som glymsyng, and no parfit sighte" (4. 2383), and her explanation:

Right so a man that longe hath blynd ybe,  
Ne may nat sodeynly so wel yse,  
First whan his sighte is newe come ageyn,

[4. 2401-3]

January even accepts what May tells him: "Ther may ful many a sighte yow bigile" before "youre sighte ysatled be a while" (4. 2405-6). The tale ends with January's continuance in willful blindness and with the happiness of a willed innocence as he looks forward to the birth of his heir:

This Januarie, who is glad but he?



This Januarie, who is glad but he?  
He kisseth hire, and clippeth hire ful ofte,  
And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe.

[4. 2412-14]

In the discussion of marriage, the *Merchant's Tale* neither challenges nor denies the *Clerk's Tale*. Rather, the two tales work together examining two versions of male willfulness in marriage and implying ways in which we can interpret and understand it.

The relationship between the tales by the Squire and the Franklin, which make up fragment five, is less transparent because the *Squire's Tale* is itself incomplete. Since we do not know whether Chaucer created the tale as an intentional fragment, as he seems to have done with his tale of *Sir Thopas*, or simply never completed it, any examination of its relationship to the *Franklin's Tale* must remain speculative.<sup>23</sup> About the two tales of this fragment, however, this much is certain: the *Franklin's Tale* develops from the Franklin's response in the link to the Squire and his tale. Whether for reasons of flattery or for genuine appreciation, the Franklin admires the Squire's "gentil" manner. His own tale, of course, is about "gentillesse," and in it he is sanguine about the power of "gentillesse" in human beings to make things right and to overcome a difficult situation. By contrast, what we have of the *Squire's Tale* spends much time—its second part—emphasizing Canacee's "gentil herte" in response to the suffering falcon whose lover "semed welle of alle gentillesse" (5. 505), but who showed that he had "no gentillesse of blood" (5. 620) when he flew off with a "kyte." Whatever other matter the first part of the tale contains, whatever else of "grete mervailles" (5. 660) the Squire promises to tell but never does, seems peripheral to the central action of the second part of the tale, its most coherent part. The concern of this part is directly related to the concern of the *Franklin's Tale*. But whereas the second part of the *Squire's Tale* implies that "gentillesse" is a quality easily feigned, the *Franklin's Tale* understands the term as a genuine condition of character, not influenced by birth or limited to class. Though both tales use the concept of "gentillesse," each understands and applies it differently, creating a sense, as with "multiplicacion," that "termes" themselves can create ambiguity because they can contain their conceptual opposites within them.

The first fragment of the "Marriage Group," fragment three, contains only one tale about marriage, and two others, by the Friar and the Summoner, that have nothing to do with marriage. It is curious that, however often the "Marriage Group" is discussed, from the time Eleanor Hammond introduced the term until now,<sup>24</sup> no one has seemed particularly concerned with the possibility that this fragment might have its own thematic coherence not necessarily concerned with marriage.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, critical interest in the subject of marriage in the three fragments that constitute the "Marriage Group" has caused us to overlook the fact that the form of fragment three is different from the form of the two other fragments. Fragment three contains a long prologue and three tales, two of which are intended as attack and rebuttal. The two other fragments do not follow this pattern, for they contain only two tales, the second of which is not conceived as an answer but as a variation on a theme presented in the first. The structural pattern of fragment three is more similar to the pattern of fragment one than it is to the pattern of fragments four and five. Both fragments one and three contain a long prologue, the earlier 858 lines long, the latter 856 lines long. Both prologues are then followed by a tale, one an epic that asks "what is this world, what asketh men to have" (1. 2777), the other a romance that asks what "wommen most desiren" (3. 905). Both fragments introduce a second tale of a different nature that yet a third pilgrim takes as a personal attack. The third teller then responds vengefully with a third tale to "quite" the insult. In form, then, and not considering the nature of the content, fragment three shows Chaucer working out a structural pattern already established in fragment one.<sup>26</sup>

The similar pattern and construction of fragments one and three indicate that Chaucer also used another method to create inconclusiveness as he composed the fragments of the *Canterbury Tales*. This method was more complex than in the binary fragments, for it offered in a triadically structured fragment a causal motivation from the outer form to the second and third tales of the fragment. The difference between the two fragments under discussion is that whereas the second tale of fragment one, the *Miller's Tale*, reflects thematically on the first, the *Knight's Tale*, while it develops cause for a response from the Reeve to follow, the second tale of fragment three, the *Friar's Tale*, has

no obvious thematic connection to the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, which precedes it, although, like the earlier fragment, it develops cause for a response to follow from the Summoner.<sup>27</sup> Let us look first at some thematic and structural connections within fragment one before conjecturing about analogous connections in fragment three.

The *Miller's Tale* presents both a contrastive world view and parodic echoes of the *Knight's Tale*. It offers a fabliau and the spirit and values of the fabliau in place of the Knight's epic with its elevated philosophical concerns. Two idealistically loving knights trying to win a royal, bloodlessly virginal lady become in the *Miller's Tale* two libidiously driven clerks who seek to bed a lusty married wench; a mature, wise conquerer, a builder of civilization, who even protracts the action of the epic into a stadium he has built, yet learns by an act of the gods the limits of human power, becomes a foolish, old husband who builds circular tubs to serve as arks and becomes a laughing stock of the town because a young man's plan, in a manner of speaking, backfires. The window of the *Knight's Tale*, through which Palamon and Arcite view Emily and hence are laid low by love, is transposed down in the *Miller's Tale* to the window on the carpenter's wall through which both Nicholas and Absalom are laid low. In contrast to the parodic way the *Miller's Tale* echoes the *Knight's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale* directly answers, genre for genre, gull for gull, the tale by the Miller with a personal animus that carries from the argument between the Miller and Reeve in the outer form into the fictions of the inner form. However, the tone and attitude of the *Reeve's Tale* are more vicious than the Miller's parody of the *Knight's Tale* because the intention is vengeance and not simply another opinion about the nature of the world.

Despite structural similarity between fragments one and three, however, the thematic issues of fragment three are not clearly related from tale to tale as they are in fragment one, although the tone, intention, and the similarity in the genres of the second and third tales of fragment three directly correspond to the tales in the same position in the earlier fragment. The Friar mocks the Summoner in a tale whose theme concerns the relation of words to intention; in counteraction, the Summoner tells a more vicious, scatological tale with the same theme, using the Friar—or a Friar—as the dupe. The relationship of

these tales to the tale by the Wife of Bath, however, is less clear. Unlike the parodic echoes in the *Miller's Tale* of subject and theme in the *Knight's Tale*, the *Friar's Tale* shows no obvious connection with the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, except that the Wife of Bath's theme in the tale—what women most desire—and her sermon-like talk on “gentillesse” and age reflect Chaucer's interest, as in her prologue, in words, in the power of words, and in having the last word. Although these thematic concerns relate only obliquely to the thematic concerns with the meaning of words that course through the *Friar's Tale* and that imbue the form of the *Summoner's Tale* with a kind of nominalistic wit, they all have a common source in books one and two of Saint Jerome's *Contra Jovinianum*.<sup>28</sup>

I am less interested in the thematic connection between the tales of fragment three than I am in how the pattern of construction, a long prologue and three tales the second of which motivates the third, resembles the pattern of construction of fragment one, and how this structural affinity between fragments reveals Chaucer at work on a more complex manner of extending the possibilities of inconclusiveness than the fragments containing only two tales offer. If the form of the *Canterbury Tales* comprises a series of fragments representing opinions that individual consciousnesses project in fictional form, the fragments containing three tales each imply a more extensive analysis of the effects of varying opinions. In addition to offering two opinions about the nature of the world, these fragments present characters who respond directly to those opinions, as if the opinions were insults to their own integrity; in turn, the characters answer the insult vindictively. Fragments one and three therefore not only reveal a sense of inconclusiveness but imply that the pluralism the inconclusiveness suggests may create difficulty, especially when vicious motives are either perceived or imagined.

### III

By considering thematic as well as structural relationships within the individual fragments, I have not meant to argue either for a thematic unity or for a single meaning in the *Canterbury Tales*. Although critics have argued for a singular, univocal meaning<sup>29</sup> and have sensed a unifying artistic purpose,<sup>30</sup> my own endeavor has been to show that

Chaucer's characteristic mode of operation in the *Canterbury Tales* was to create inconclusiveness by a principle of "fragmentizing." Within each fragment he offered either another opinion on the same subject or theme, or a similar opinion handled differently or in opposition to the first. In those fragments containing only one tale, he generally built in the possibility for the development of a second, limiting opinion; in the other fragments, he offered at least two opinions, the second making the first only a partial answer.

Nowhere in Chaucer's works do we get a fuller, more complete picture of the kind of poet Chaucer was, of the breadth of his talent, and of the pluralistic effect inconclusiveness could create in the structure of a fragment than in fragment seven, the longest fragment of *Canterbury Tales*. To close this study of the ways in which inconclusiveness functions in the development of Chaucer's narrative forms, I shall examine the structure of this fragment, for in it we find Chaucer's most mature—at least, most sophisticated—uses of inconclusiveness and the rich dramatic effect he could create with it.

Although fragment seven is the only fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* considerably more developed than the fragments containing merely two or three tales, Chaucer's pattern within it of alternating kinds of tales and tellers supports my claim that he created inconclusiveness in all his fragments by providing a counter-valence to a first tale with a second. Robinson says about fragment seven that "there seems to be no principle of arrangement save that of contrast and variety."<sup>31</sup> Although this fragment does not continually alternate humorous and serious tales—the serious *Tale of Melibee* is followed by the more serious, because depressing, *Monk's Tale*—the variety of genres that the fragment contains directs our attention to the sense of multiplicity underlying Chaucer's constructional practice. This sense of multiplicity in turn makes it impossible to attach a univocal meaning to Chaucer's intention. Even Alan Gaylord, who thinks the fragment is unified by the subject of "the art of story telling," admits that the subject is "very broad."<sup>32</sup> His argument supports mine in its claim that the broad-based subject and highly developed action in the links of the outer form of fragment seven serve to make judgment and evaluation the responsibility of the reader rather than of the poet. Harry Bailly's simplistic and often misguided assertions cause us to refuse his

judgments as either overly nice or overly bourgeois. Harry is working Chaucer the poet's purpose of creating inconclusiveness by making judgments unacceptable to us. Gaylord recognizes this when he claims that if "Harry is the Apostle of the Obvious, Chaucer is the master of Indirections."<sup>33</sup> Indirection is, of course, one of the principles of construction of this fragment as well as of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole. Its relation to inconclusiveness is obvious in that Chaucer's roundabout means of composition, whose goals are not usually clear, keep the form from concluding in any certain way the options and questions it offers or raises.

Fragment seven is the most striking example of Chaucer's technique of constructing inconclusive fragments not only because it combines a variety of genres and develops Harry Bailly as an inappropriate editor of the tales. The complex interrelationship between teller and tale as well as the juxtaposition of moral and generic considerations make the fragment a most significant example. The *Shipman's Tale*, for instance, is a bawdy and witty fabliau. Yet the tale contains a dark undercurrent about the viciousness of mankind that robs the fabliau form of its expected joyous energy, an energy felt even in the angry, vicious Reeve's fabliau.<sup>34</sup> The *Prioress's Tale*, moreover, intended as a tonal and thematic counter to the Shipman's fabliau, is complicated by the Prioress's extensive use of an overly sentimental and judgmental rhetoric. Like the *Reeve's Tale*, the *Prioress's Tale* functions as a psychological revelation of character that cuts deeper than a simple appropriateness of tale to teller. It reveals so many particular aspects of the Prioress's character, as it was presented in the *General Prologue*, that a typological interpretation of her "condicioun" as the tale reveals it is finally less than satisfactory. In light of what we know about her naïveté and secular aspirations, one cannot read her tale simply as a pious Miracle of the Blessed Virgin.<sup>35</sup>

Absurdity characterizes Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*. The parodic and comical mood he establishes in the tale counteracts the sober effect of the Prioress's narrative. This tale not only makes fun of the form and content of metrical romance; it claims, if taken seriously (and Chaucer the pilgrim tells us the tale in absolute earnest), that a legitimate literary genre may be a total failure and that a narrative form can be meaningless. *Sir Thopas* argues for meaninglessness based on a

principle of incoherence. Its effect is not much different from that of the *House of Fame*, except that in the earlier poem incoherence seemed a problem caused by trying to handle too much within a single form and trying to direct that overabundance toward a single conclusion. In *Sir Thopas*, however, incoherence is intentional, not accidental. Harry is right that this brilliantly allusive story is "drasty," hence "nat worth a toord" (7. 2120). Meaninglessness is its reason for being, and the purposeful interruption at the beginning of the Third Fit is as good a place to end it as any, for a poem without a meaning cannot have a natural conclusion.<sup>36</sup>

The purposeful interruption of the *Tale of Sir Thopas* reminds us that there is a fictional audience, not unlike us, attentive to the fictions, aware of its responsibility to evaluate. Like us, they too are seeking "sentence" and "solaas" from the stories, and like us, they may be periodically confused about the point and purpose of a tale. The case is even clearer later in the fragment when Chaucer has the Knight interrupt the Monk, for unlike the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, the meaning of the *Monk's Tale* is very clear indeed. Its clarity not its confusion is what makes it intolerable.

Chaucer's second tale of *Melibee* is no tale at all. It is a close translation of Renaud de Louen's *Livre de Melibée*. Like the *Boece*, and even like the meditation that comprises the *Parson's Tale*, the treatise could probably have stood on its own as one of Chaucer's translations, except that its sober reasoning and its argument against vengeful action provide an antidote to the driving activity, "prickyng," and challenging that characterize the *Tale of Sir Thopas*; hence it serves as a variational possibility within the fragment. It does not come, however, as a welcome relief; for although the argument of the *Melibee* is interestingly worked out, its length and sober proverbial style seem to be a problem for modern readers.<sup>37</sup> Harry's response to the tale is positive, but his understanding of the virtue of prudence seems doubtful and his narrow application of the moral is reductive. Ironically, Harry sees the *Melibee* not only as a moral treatise but as a fiction from which he would like his wife to learn something.

With Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, the pattern of alternation so far structuring fragment seven ends, for the *Monk's Tale* continues the sobriety established by the *Melibee* despite Harry's contrary ex-

pectations. It moves the sober tone into the realm of the dour and bitter. Difficult as the *Melibee* is to read through, its vision is continually optimistic. Just the opposite is true of the *Monk's Tale*. It is a pessimistic vision of the world and of man's powerlessness in it. Its pessimism is the reason for its remaining incomplete, for the Knight senses that the tale contains too much unmediated heaviness. The interesting thing about the *Monk's Tale* for our purposes is that its intentional incompleteness comes about for reasons opposite to those that left *Sir Thopas* purposefully incomplete. Whereas *Sir Thopas* is incomplete because its absurdity and incoherence make conclusiveness of any sort impossible, the *Monk's Tale* is incomplete because, like the *Legend of Good Women*, it is conclusive with a vengeance. The *Monk's Tale* may be the most conclusive piece of literature Chaucer ever wrote. For the Monk, tragedy is a foregone conclusion, and all the stories that make up the tale appear as examples of the same conclusion established from beginning—that Fortune deprives man of happiness and that life continually frustrates man's urges for power. The two definitions of tragedy that flank the seventeen examples are slightly different from each other, but the argument of the tale is constructed by a method of *post hoc, propter hoc*, unlike any of Chaucer's other fictions. What is defined at the beginning and fictively exemplified throughout the middle is again redefined at or toward the end (the manuscripts are not consistent in their organization of the separable parts of the tale). The form of the entire tale is a conclusion, but the conclusion is unsatisfying to two members of the pilgrimage and apparently to the poet, so that it is interrupted, gently by the Knight and severely by Harry, and then followed by the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, whose greatest virtue is, by contrast, the inconclusiveness of its form and the joy that inconclusiveness produces.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* may be Chaucer's most beloved tale, but nobody has been able to offer a total reading of its meaning. The illusiveness of its meaning is, in fact, its chief delight. From its humble opening, as in black and white, the fable bursts forth into glorious technicolor once it moves into the *locus amoenus*—Chauntecleer's Paradise, "a yeerde . . . enclosed al aboute / with stikkes and a drye dych without" (7. 2847–48). In this enclosed "yeerde," chickens enact the fall of man (birds were always Chaucer's favorite exemplary animals),



and his salvation as well. Just as Chauntecleer, despite the warning of his dream and his conclusion that "I shal han of this avisioun / adversitee" (7. 3152-53), flies down from his edenic perch toward impending tragedy, so too he saves himself by his chicken-wit. By the end of the story, he has flown "heighe upon a tree" (7. 3417), safe from death. From serious line to serious line, the story offers a frequently altering set of attitudes that offer as frequently an altered set of conclusions. If anything is certain about the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, it is its alterability, its shifting morality, and its "continuously human suggestion of the relativity of things."<sup>38</sup> Chaucer draws through its plot most of his literary interests: the value of dreams; the value of love; the nature of heroism; the nature of wit; the function of rhetoric; even the value of poetry. At the end of the tale, the priest-narrator asks us to take the "moralite," assuming that we are "goode men" (7. 3440). But the morality is as shifting and inconclusive as the rest of its form. Is it that we should not listen to our wives, or that we should? Is it that we should pay attention to our dreams, should not be caught in "sensual music," should not listen to flattery, should not speak too soon, or should use our wits to save us when all else seems to fail? The tale suggests all, not one, even though some of the morals reside in joyful contradiction with others.

Since we know almost nothing about the tale's narrator, only that he is a brawny priest riding as a part of the Prioress's entourage and that he promises to be "myrie" (7. 2817), we can have few expectations for the genre or meaning of the story he will tell. The story echoes lines, attitudes, and considerations of all the tales that precede it in the fragment but never rests long enough to offer a solid ground for comparative interpretation. As a mock epic, it incorporates elements of fabliau and of tragedy. The Nun's Priest discourses with learning but denies learnedness; he raises serious issues about value but claims meaninglessness, for his story is simply a tale of a cock. He denies any rhetorical ability with brilliant rhetorical flourishes. Even the textual problem with calendar time, remarked by modern editors,<sup>39</sup> seems to work toward the tale's inconclusive effect:

Whan that the month in which the world bigan,  
That highte March, whan God first maked man,  
Was compleet, and passed were also,

Syn March bigan, thritty dayes and two,  
 Bifel that Chauntecleer in al his pryde,  
 His sevene wyves walkynge by his syde,  
 Caste up his eyen to the brighte sonne  
 That in the signe of Taurus hadde yronne  
 Twenty degrees and oon, and somewhat moore,  
 And knew by kynde, and by noon oother loore,  
 That it was pryme, and crew with blisful stevene.  
 "The sonne," he seyde, "is clomben up on hevene  
 Fourty degrees and oon, and moore ywis."

[7. 3187-99]

Counting from the time that "the world bigan," that time when "God first maked man," and depending on Chauntecleer's expertise at reading the heavens astrologically, "by kynde," we get two dates, without textual correction, during which the almost-tragedy occurs. The first date is May third, a date Chaucer mentions specifically elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> The other date is April first, sustaining any opinion that this tale may be taken as an April Fool's joke. Just as the meaning of the tale seems conceived in inconclusiveness, so the dates do not align. But their nonalignment does not matter. Relativity in telling time seems to this tale of a piece with the inconclusiveness of its form. It is with this joyously inconclusive tale that Chaucer ends his longest fragment after wandering through, testing, and complicating meaning by varying a group of dissimilar tales in different genres. Among the many senses with which we are left at the end of this tale and of the fragment is the sense that everything will be all right.

Patrick Gallacher argues that the concept of catharsis informs and enlivens the *Nun's Priest's Tale* on both its literal and symbolic levels.<sup>41</sup> In a more figurative way, the same could be said about the form of the entire *Canterbury Tales*. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* exemplifies an inconclusive form within the inner form of the *Canterbury Tales* analogous to the form of the entire work. Just as meaning within the tale constantly alters, points one way then another, raises emotion and purges it while on its inexorable route to an end that is ultimately happy, though inconclusively so, the form of the *Canterbury Tales* raises alters, shifts, and purges whole spheres of emotion, suggesting a spectrum of meaning as the pilgrims move toward Canterbury. The form continually tests the appropriateness of opinion while supplying a

rich texture of suggestions about the possibilities of literature to imitate life and mind, and to mean conclusively. Because often peculiar psychology controls meaning and projects it through various narrative genres, the entire form of the *Canterbury Tales* suggests, finally, that for Chaucer conclusive meaning in literature is neither possible nor desirable. Yet the form also suggests that opinion itself may validly serve as a means for poetry.

The *Canterbury Tales* is Chaucer's final, most complex, narrative form. It represents the culmination of a career of literary experimentation with both dream visions and storied narratives. Whatever lessons Chaucer learned about meaning and its inconclusiveness from his earlier, more limited, works stood him in good stead as he produced the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer was never able to write comfortably within the traditional forms he inherited because his questioning mind and ambivalent temperament seeking to discover how poetry could represent truth continually encountered frustration, equivocation, inconclusiveness. Remarkably in the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer discovered that he could construct a work that could suggest versions of truth; he did not need to adjudicate which version was the best, the most acceptable. He could leave evaluation to his audience and to his interpreters while he presented all possibilities and denied none. Through a series of responses to the questions "What is this world, what asketh men to have?", Chaucer produced a narrative form comprising many plausible imitations of reality that suggests pluralism through opinion.

This form was not without its problems for Chaucer. The pluralistic nature of reality that the form suggests must have worried this poet whose earlier works express a continuously earnest desire to know things with certainty. The relativity that the form implies may well have led Chaucer to create in his later fragments the dark implications about meaning and about truth in the world that Howard has noticed.<sup>42</sup> In these late fragments, Chaucer counterbalances opinions about the value of spiritual alchemy and the valuelessness of material alchemy; he offers us the Manciple's impassioned conclusion to "kepe wel thy tonge, and thenk upon the crowe" (9. 362); and finally, he offers us a meditation that is intended to put us in mind of the heavenly

city of "Jerusalem celestial" (10. 51). These conclusions suggest an increasing realization on Chaucer's part that the form of *Canterbury Tales* was growing problematic, not only because it was implying a skepticism that literature could provide certainty of meaning, but because the relativity that his inconclusive form was offering frightened him. The fact that Chaucer chose to end his *Canterbury Tales* with an orthodox Christian meditation by the most idealized pilgrim, and to follow it by his own retraction, despite the unfinished state of the middle, suggests that he was finally more fearful of the future of his soul than the experimental nature of his poetry implies.

In the fifteenth century, when most of the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were being copied, those English and Scots poets whom we call Chaucerians because they continually imitated and praised Chaucer showed little interest in imitating the form the master developed in the *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>43</sup> To be sure, Lydgate attempted in the prologue to the *Siege of Thebes* to attach himself to the pilgrimage and to tell a Canterbury Tale; Henryson used the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (without its inconclusiveness) in his *Fables*; and Dunbar used the materials of the Wife of Bath in his sarcastic *Two Married Ladyes and the Widow*. Otherwise these Chaucerians of the fifteenth century were more interested in imitating the forms of the earlier Chaucer, the dream visions and the love narratives. Apparently the fifteenth century in England was not congenial to a literary form that enjoyed inconclusiveness and the possibilities for pluralistic meaning it suggested. For this reason, perhaps, when we work back from the Renaissance, we spend little time in the fifteenth century, but move directly to Chaucer in the fourteenth for strong signs of a modern epistemology.

## Notes

### Abbreviations

AN&Q	<i>American Notes and Queries</i>
CE	<i>College English</i>
CentR	<i>Centennial Review</i>
ChauR	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
ELH	<i>Journal of English Literary History</i>
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
MAE	<i>Medium Aevum</i>
MLN	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
MLQ	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
MP	<i>Modern Philology</i>
MS	<i>Mediaeval Studies</i>
NM	<i>Neuphilologische Mitteilungen</i>
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. Migne
PQ	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
RES	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
RLV	<i>Revue des Langues Vivantes</i>
SP	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
UTQ	<i>University of Toronto Quarterly</i>
YES	<i>Yearbook of English studies</i>

### Chapter One

1. "The Literary Form of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *MP* 49 (1952): 174.
2. On the relationship of literary form and emotional affect, see Simon O. Lesser, *Fiction and the Unconscious* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957), esp. pp. 121-44, 188-211, 238, 268; and Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), esp. pp. 104-33, 281-307.
3. For a survey of opinions, see Vance Ramsey, "Modes of Irony in *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 291-312.
4. Cf. Peter Elbow, *Oppositions in Chaucer* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973, 1975).
5. For an examination of ambivalence in a specific work by Chaucer, see Paul T. Thurston, *Artistic Ambivalence in Chaucer's Knight's Tale* (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1968).
6. John M. Manly, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 12 (1926): 100.
7. See, for example, Bertrand H. Bronson, "The Book of the Duchess Re-opened," *PMLA* 57 (1952): 863-81.

8. For an analysis of how Chaucer's dream visions develop traditional subjects and tropes, see Wolfgang Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, trans. C. A. M. Sym (London: Methuen and Co., 1963).

9. The different narrative kinds in which Chaucer composes dictate different narrative functions for the first-person consciousness who represents him. In accordance with common practice, I shall distinguish these different functions by calling the voice of the dream visions the persona, the voice of legendary narratives like *Troilus* the narrator, and the voice of *Canterbury Tales* the character or the pilgrim Chaucer. There seems to be a relationship between Chaucer the poet's separation of himself from his fictional voice and his control of his form. The more control he has over his form, the more clearly separate Chaucer seems from the voice representing him. At the point where the poet shows the greatest control of form, in *Canterbury Tales*, his alter ego the pilgrim is reduced to narrative incompetence.

10. On the arithmetic problem of the *General Prologue*, see Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Twenty-Nine Pilgrims and the Three Priests," *MLN* 76 (1961): 392-97; and Caroline D. Eckhardt, "The Number of Chaucer's Pilgrims: A Review and Reappraisal," *YES* 5 (1975): 1-18.

11. On the distinctions between Harry's plan for tale-telling and Chaucer's, see Donald Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), esp. pp. 17-18, 21-22, 27-28.

12. Eleanor P. Hammond, *Chaucer: A Bibliographical Manual* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), pp. 254-57.

13. For interpretations of the meaning of the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, see Bruce L. Greenberg, "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale: Boethian Wisdom and the Alchemist's," *ChauR* 1 (1966): 37-54; and John Gardner, "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale: An Interpretation," *PQ* 46 (1967): 1-17.

14. Cf. Bruce A. Rosenberg, "Swindling Alchemist, Antichrist," *CentR* 6 (1962): 566-80.

15. The fact that the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* precedes the *Physician's Tale* in many manuscripts does not convince me that, as Chaucer integrated the materials for the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale* more fully into the developing structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, he would have included him in the *General Prologue*; nor does it invalidate my argument that with the Canon's Yeoman, Chaucer found a way to open up a previously conceived closed form.

16. See Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), esp. pp. 37-63 and 158-67.

17. *Benjamin Minor*, chap. 71, in *PL*, vol. 196, col. 51. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Latin are mine.)

18. *The Life of St. Anselm*, ed. and trans. R. W. Southern (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962), I. 19, pp. 28-31.

19. *PL* vol. 182, cols. 987-92.

20. *Liber de Spirituali Amicitia*, in *PL*, vol. 195, cols. 659-702; see also *Speculum Charitatis et Compendium Speculi Charitatis*, in *PL*, vol. 195, cols. 501-620 and 621-658.

21. *Ad Commentarios in Genesim, proemium*, in *PL*, vol. 156, col. 276.

22. In a conference on the renaissance of the twelfth century, held at Harvard University in November 1977, John F. Benton delivered a paper entitled "Consciousness of Self and of 'Personality,'" which offered numerous, less accessible, examples of this epistemology at work.

23. Robert Hanning, *The Individual in Twelfth-Century Romance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 234-235. Cf. Larry M. Sklute, "The Ambiguity of Ethical Norms in Courtly Romance," *Genre* 11 (1978): 315-32.

24. On some useful epistemological distinctions between Aristotelianism and Platonism, see Marjorie Greene, *The Knower and the Known* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 17-63.

25. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 389.

26. Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).

27. Cf. Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame: The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 13-21 and 32-34.

28. These controversies were actually a part of the larger philosophical problem of free will and necessity. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the problem was frequently cast in terms of the *potentia absoluta* vs. the *potentia ordinata* of God. On the distinction, see Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 30-36.

29. F. Ehrle, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der mittelalterlichen Scholastik*, II, *Der Augustinismus und Aristotelismus in der Scholastik gegen Ende des dreizehnten Jahrhunderts*, *Archiv für Literatur und Kirchengeschichte des Mittelalters*, no. 5 (1889), pp. 603-34; see also his *L'Agostinismo e l'Aristotelismo nella Scolastica del Secolo XIII*, *Xenia Thomistica*, no. 3 (Rome, 1925), pp. 14-21, 38-76, 517-88.

30. William of Ockham, *In Sententiarum I, Opera Plurima*, vol. 3, (Lyon, 1494-96; rpt. in facsimile [London: Gregg Press, 1962]), *Distinctionis* 3, *Questio* 2F, *prima Probatum*.

31. Ockham, *Sent.*, *Prologi*, *Questio* 1Z, *Responsio ad Articulum*.

32. Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians: A Study of 'De Causa Dei' and Its Opponents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957); see also the fascinating account of Wycliff's epistemology and his "realism" in Geoffrey Shepherd, "Religion and Philosophy in Chaucer," in *Geoffrey Chaucer, Writers and Their Background*, ed. Derek Brewer (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974) pp. 277-80.

33. Leff, *Bradwardine*, p. 130.

34. See especially Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 10-43; *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 52-138; however, cf. Derek Brewer, "Gothic Chaucer," in *Chaucer*, ed. Brewer, pp. 1-32.

35. I have been encouraged in my argument by the interest that some recent books on Chaucer have shown in epistemology as a useful category for interpreting Chaucer's meaning. Aside from Howard's *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, I am thinking of Robert Burlin's *Chaucerian Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), which appeared after my manuscript had been written in first draft, and John Fyler's *Ovid and Chaucer* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), which appeared after my manuscript had been revised. Although not explicitly interested in intellectual thought and epistemology, Alfred David's *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976) implies them as the historical cause of Chaucer's conflict between art and morals. See also David Aers's

*Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); Joerg O. Fichte's *Chaucer's "Art Poetical": A Study in Chaucer's Poetics*, *Studies in English*, One (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1980); and especially, Russell A. Peck's "Chaucer and the Nominalist Questions," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 745-60. However, cf. Raymond P. Tripp, Jr.'s *Beyond Canterbury: Chaucer, Humanism, and Literature* (Church Stretton, England: Onny Press, 1977).

### Chapter Two

1. The nature and function of the Chaucerian persona has been repeatedly discussed, most recently by A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 48-110, *passim*; and by Alfred David, *Strumpet Muse*, esp. pp. 56-58, 215-20. See also Ann Chalmers Watts, "Chaucerian Selves—Especially Two Serious Ones," *ChauR* 4 (1970): 229-41. For a more extensive citing of what has become a tradition of discussion about the Chaucerian persona, see below, chapter three, note 19.

2. Larry Sklute, "Expectation and Fulfillment in *Pearl*," *PQ* 52 (1973): 663-79.

3. For descriptions of the persona-as-character like my own, see especially Dorothy Everett, "Some Reflections on Chaucer's 'Art Poetical,'" in *Essays on Middle English Literature*, ed. Patricia Kean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 149-74; Robert O. Payne, "Making His Own Myth: The Prologue to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *ChauR* 9 (1975): 197-211. However, cf. Thomas J. Garbaty, "The Degradation of Chaucer's 'Geoffrey,'" *PMLA* 89 (1974): 94-104. See also Christopher Brookhouse, "In Search of Chaucer: The Needed Narrative," in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson, *Harvard English Studies*, no. 5 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 67-80.

4. For a fully developed analysis of the *dits amoureux* in relation to the *Book of the Duchess*, see James Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The Literary Backgrounds of the Book of the Duchess* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); see also William Calin, *A Poet at the Fountain: Essays on the Narrative Verse of Guillaume de Machaut*, *Studies in Romance Languages*, no. 9 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974).

5. Cf. Robert M. Jordan, "The Compositional Structure of the *Book of the Duchess*," *ChauR* 9 (1974): 99-117.

6. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets*, p. 156.

7. See John M. Hill, "The *Book of the Duchess*, Melancholy, and That Eight-Year Sickness," *ChauR* 9 (1974): 35-50.

8. See Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion (Yvain)*, ed. Mario Roques (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, Editeur), ll. 1375-78.

9. Spearing, *Dream-Poetry*, pp. 48 ff., quotes Jung, although his analyses are not particularly "Jungian."

10. There have been numerous attempts to identify the occasion or the moral of the *Book of the Duchess* by identifying Octavian as Edward III (Robinson, ed. *Chaucer*, p. 775, note to line 368); as a pun meaning "Christ is coming" (D. W. Robertson, Jr., and Bernard Huppé, *Fruit and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963], pp. 49-50). More recently, see Russell A. Peck, "Theme and Number in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," in *Silent Poetry*, ed. Alastair Fowler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 100. Howard Rollin Patch, *On Rereading Chaucer* (1939; rpt. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 199, is apparently the first to have seen a connection between



Octavian and the Golden Age. John Fyler, "Irony and the Age of Gold in the *Book of the Duchess*," *Speculum* 52 (1977): 314-28, has developed the connection as a part of his examination of the elegiac quality of the poem. He astutely points out that the narrator is so self-absorbed that his consolatory exempla to the Knight's grief fail "to mention the one example obviously analogous to the Knight's predicament: Ceyx and Alcyone."

11. Perhaps for this reason, Kittredge mistakenly thought that the persona understood the lyric but for therapeutic reasons refused to let the Knight, or us, know about it; see *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1915), p. 49.

12. On the function of the lyric and the narrator's response to it, see W. H. French, "The Man in Black's Lyric," *JEGP* 56 (1957): 231-41.

13. See John Lawlor, "The Pattern of Consolation in the *Book of the Duchess*," *Speculum* 31 (1956): 626-48, and *Chaucer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 19-26.

14. On stylistic conventionalism in the *Book of the Duchess*, see Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), pp. 101-7.

### Chapter Three

1. See, for example, Percy Van Dyke Shelly, *The Living Chaucer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1940), p. 84; Nevil Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 49; J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Mind and Art of Chaucer* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1950), p. 59; Clemen, *Chaucer's Early Poetry*, pp. 120-21; Muscatine, *French Tradition*, pp. 107-14; Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 133-39; Delany, *Skeptical Fideism*, passim; David, *Strumpet Muse*, p. 20; Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction*, pp. 45-48. However, cf. W. O. Sypherd, "The Completeness of Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *MLN* 30 (1915): 16-29, rpt. *Chaucer Criticism*, eds. R. K. Schoeck and J. Taylor, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1961), 2:261-74.

2. W. O. Sypherd, *Studies in Chaucer's "House of Fame"*, Chaucer Society, 2d ser., no. 39 (London, 1907); Bertrand H. Bronson, *Chaucer's "House of Fame": Another Hypothesis*, University of California Publications in English, 3, No. 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), pp. 171-92; B. G. Koonce, *Chaucer and the Tradition of Fame: Symbolism in the "House of Fame"* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), passim; Norman E. Eliason, *The Language of Chaucer's Poetry* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1972), pp. 186-91. However, cf. Paul F. Baum, "Chaucer's The House of Fame," *ELH* 8 (1941): 248-56, who concludes that "the ultimate tidings of love from the man of authority would have inevitably been . . . a disappointment and disillusion." Also see Donald K. Fry, "The Ending of the *House of Fame*," in *Chaucer at Albany*, ed. R. H. Robbins et al. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1975), pp. 27-40.

3. It is a commonplace of Chaucer criticism that Chaucer is a poet of love and that the dream-vision form, inherited from the French, is itself the vehicle in which love and its vicissitudes came traditionally to be expressed. However, though the persona repeatedly asserts that love is the subject of his poems, his dreams, and his studies, he is not himself a lover, as are many poets of the *dis amoureux*. Rather he is a clerk, like Jean de Meung, in search of materials about love. Yet he differs even from poets like Jean in his interest in the poet, in poetry, which repeatedly preempts his stated subject, love. We never forget that Jean is writing about the concept of love, categorizing it into constituent parts, and examining its effects. In Chaucer, especially in the dream-visions after the *Book of the Duchess*, the experience of the dreamer as a

poet in search of knowledge, of certainty, challenges the experience of love for the reader's attention. Not until *Troilus*, when he leaves the dream-vision form and turns to translating a narrative love story out of legend or history, does Chaucer ever really stand out as anything resembling a poet of love. To be sure, the subject of love is significant to each of the dream visions. The Black Knight's suffering, the experience in the Temple of Glass, Nature's calling of the parliament of birds, all concern love in some way. The eagle in the *House of Fame*, moreover, tells the persona: "Thou writest, / and ever mo of love enditest" (633-34). Yet, these poems seem less about love than about a poet's experiences in search of answers to questions about meaning in dream experiences. The poems use love but absorb it into a poetic framework about the poet's experience. This distinction between an ostensible subject, love, and an apparent subject, poetic experience, creates a tension in the forms of the early dream visions that contributes to the general sense of inconclusiveness we feel in the forms of the poems. On Chaucer as a poet of love, see, for example, the group of essays collected in *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1973), and David, *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 17-20. Cf. my remarks here with those by Lawrence K. Shook, "The House of Fame," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Rowland, pp. 341-54.

4. In this poem the persona's experiences are overwhelmingly visual and aural. Information from the sense of touch is infrequent and from the senses of taste and smell is absent. The persona's visceral reaction to flight produces swooning, sight/sound, not nausea, its alimentary equivalent. The absence of the alimentary senses is particularly interesting in light of John Leyerle's suggestive interpretation of the poem as motivated by breaking wind; see "Chaucer's Windy Eagle," *UTQ* 40 (1971): 247-65.

5. Cf. David Bevington, "The Obtuse Narrator in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Speculum* 36 (1961): 288-98; J. L. Simmons, "The Place of the Poet in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *MLQ* 27 (1966): 125-35.

6. "During the later middle ages St. Leonard was greatly revered in France, England and Germany, but nothing certain is known about him; the eleventh-century Life in which he is first mentioned tells us, among other things, that he was a hermit, who founded a monastery in Noblac (now Saint-Leonard), near Limoges, in the sixth century. Doubtless his popularity was due to the very large number of miracles and aids attributed to his intercession, and to the enthusiasm of returning crusaders, who looked on him as the patron saint of prisoners" (Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965], p. 218).

7. Delany, *Skeptical Fideism*, pp. 48-57.

8. On the effects for interpretation of this distinction, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 1-23; Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 3-20.

9. A lover forswearing himself in order to get what he wants informs not only book one of the *House of Fame* and some stories in *Legend of Good Women*. It is an issue in *Troilus*, although the sexes are reversed, and is directly related to the central concern of *Anelida*, the *Squire's Tale*, and, in the larger sense of swearing oaths in general, to the tales by the Franklin and the Friar. Indeed, swearing and forswearing oaths is one of Chaucer's most fundamental and abiding thematic concerns.

10. Delany, *Skeptical Fideism*, pp. 58-68.

11. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rouse, Loeb Classical

Library (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 9. 138–39; for a description of Fame's dwelling, which Chaucer appropriates for his House of Rumor, see 12. 39 ff.

12. Chaucer's analogy suggests an eccentric but not unique scientific understanding. Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1923), p. 132, points out similarly peculiar views concerning rivers and the sea in Hildegard of Bingen's *Subtilitates*, 2. 3, and in the *Secretum Secretorum* of the Pseudo-Aristotle (ed. Roger Bacon), both of which were written before Chaucer.

13. Cf. David H. Zucker, "The Detached and Judging Narrator in Chaucer's *House of Fame*," *Thoth* 8 (1967): 3–22.

14. The *OED* gives no support for the reading of "for" in the sense of "by" to indicate passive construction, although it is possible that "for" can mean "through," indicating something like a dative of means. Generally, however, "for" signifies "for the sake of."

15. Muscatine, *French Tradition*, p. 108. However, cf. Eugene Vance, "Chaucer's *House of Fame* and the Poetics of Inflation," *Boundary 2* 7 (1979): 17–37.

16. Cf. John P. McCall, "The Harmony of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*," *ChauR* 5 (1970): 22–31; also, Michael P. Kelley, "Antithesis as the Principle of Design in the *Parlement of Foules*," *ChauR* 14 (1979): 61–73.

17. Cf. Muscatine, *French Tradition*, pp. 119–20; and Payne, *Key of Remembrance*, pp. 139–46.

18. Cf. David Chamberlain, "The Music of the Spheres and the *Parliament of Fowls*," *ChauR* 5 (1970): 32–56.

19. This assertion about the persona's lack of involvement does not contradict my point, made earlier, about Chaucer's intense involvement in his three early dream visions with the elements of meaning in the dream experience. Since the arguments by Ben Kimpel, "The Narrator of the *Canterbury Tales*," *ELH* 20 (1953): 77–96, and by E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA* 69 (1954): 928–36, most of us accept a complex relationship between the poet and the persona, but we also recognize a distinction. However, cf. the admonitions in Bertrand H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), pp. 25–32, and in John M. Major, "The Personality of Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA* 80 (1965): 337–43. On the artistic uses of the Chaucerian persona in the dream-visions as opposed to the *Canterbury Tales*, see Dorothy Bethurum, "Chaucer's Point of View as Narrator in the Love Poems," *PMLA* 74 (1959): 511–20.

20. For examinations of the opening and its relation to the meaning of the poem, see H. S. Bennett, *Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), pp. 89–90; Everett, "Chaucer's Love Visions, with Particular Reference to the *Parlement of Foules*," in *Essays*, pp. 103 ff.; J. A. W. Bennett, *The Parliament of Fowls: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), pp. 29 ff.; D. S. Brewer, ed., *The Parlement of Foules* (London: Nelson, 1960), pp. 48 ff.; Clemen, *Early Poetry*, pp. 130 ff.; Payne, *Key of Remembrance*, p. 143; George D. Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 125 ff.; David, *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 21 ff.; Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction*, pp. 84 ff.

21. David, *Strumpet Muse*, p. 21, comes close to, but finally ducks, the issue of the syntax by stating: "One expects the old adage to be applied to the art of poetry, not, as it actually turns out, the art of love, but the art of poetry is never far from Chaucer's mind in composing the so-called 'love visions'." Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction*, pp. 84–85, faces the matter of the syntactic ambigui-

ity, analyzes it rhetorically, and concludes: "It is still possible to ask, is this an art of love or an art of loving? A treatise of philosophical objectivity or a practical handbook? Both possibilities seem to inform the opening lines."

22. Bennett, *Parliament of Fowles*, pp. 44-45, argues that the certain thing is "love doctrine."

23. Bennett, *Parliament of Fowles*, p. 69.

24. Cf. Robert M. Lumiansky, "Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowles*: A Philosophical Interpretation," *RES* 24 (1948): 81-89.

25. The unpleasant quality of Craft is apparently intensified by either confusion or mistranslation from Boccaccio. Regarding these lines, Bennett points out the following in a note: "In the following line Craft is described as 'disfigurat'—a nonce word, derived from Boccaccio's *figurate*; the etymological note in O.E.D., s.v., requires revision" (*Parliament of Fowles*, p. 88 n. 3).

26. However, cf. Howard Schless, "Transformations: Chaucer's Use of Italian," in *Chaucer*, ed. Brewer, pp. 197-207.

27. Cf. Charles O. McDonald, "An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowles*," *Speculum* 30 (1955): 456-57.

28. See the reading in Economou, *The Goddess Natura*, pp. 145 ff.

#### Chapter Four

1. My distinction between the two kinds of narratives Chaucer wrote—dream-vision and storial—is not intended to substitute for the different, interesting, though not particularly relevant distinctions between the various narrative genres in which Chaucer composed. On the question of Chaucerian genres, see Paul Strohm, "Some Generic Distinctions in the *Canterbury Tales*," *MP* 68 (1970-71): 321-28; and also his "Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives," *Speculum* 46 (1971): 348-59. See as well the review article by Theodore A. Stroud, "Genres and Themes: A Reaction to Two Views of Chaucer," *MP* 72 (1974): 60-70.

2. Robinson, in *Works*, p. 790, note to l. 105, lists parallels between *Anelida* and the *Squire's Tale*. The list of parallels may be intended to suggest that Chaucer composed the *Squire's Tale* at about the time he was composing *Anelida*, but Robinson never asserts this.

3. See Payne, *Key of Remembrance*, pp. 69-73.

4. On Chaucer's use of Statius, see B. A. Wise, *The Influence of Statius upon Chaucer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1911); and Paul M. Clogon, "Chaucer and the *Thebiad* Scholia," *SP* 61 (1964): 599-615.

5. Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer's Use of the *Teseida*," *PMLA* 62 (1964): 599-614.

6. Cf. Michael D. Cherniss, "Chaucer's *Anelida* and *Arcite*: Some Conjectures," *ChauR* 5 (1970): 9-21.

7. See the argument by James I. Wimsatt, "*Anelida* and *Arcite*: A Narrative of Complaint and Comfort," *ChauR* 5 (1970): 1-8.

8. For a recent argument about the *Complaint of Mars* and the *Complaint of Venus* as a single poem—the *Broche of Thebes*—see Rodney Merrill, *Chaucer's "Broche of Thebes": The Unity of The Complaint of Mars and The Complaint of Venus*, Literary monographs, no. 5 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), pp. 1-61.

9. See Robinson, "Introductory Remarks to Explanatory Notes on *Anelida* and *Arcite*," *Works*, p. 789.

10. Cf. Robert M. Jordan, "The Narrator of Chaucer's *Troilus*," *ELH* 25 (1958): 237-57.
11. "Distance and Predetermination in *Troilus and Criseyde*," *PMLA* 72 (1957): 14-26; rpt., and hereafter quoted from, *Essays and Explorations: Studies in Ideas, Language, and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 200-216. This quotation is from p. 203.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
13. Muscatine, *French Tradition*, pp. 132-33.
14. E. Talbot Donaldson, "Criseide and her Narrator," in *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone Press, 1970), pp. 68-69.
15. See Robert A. Durling, *The Figure of the Poet in the Renaissance Epic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), esp. pp. 44-66.
16. Bloomfield, "Distance," p. 210.
17. Aristotle's argument that plot is more significant than character is implicit as a value throughout his *Poetics*, although he confronts the issue explicitly only in chapter 6. I have used the translation by Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), pp. 61-64.
18. Muscatine, *French Tradition*, p. 133.
19. Cf. Geoffrey Shepherd, "Troilus and Criseyde," in *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. S. Brewer (University: University of Alabama Press, 1966), pp. 65-87; see also Michael E. Cotton, "The Artistic Integrity of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *ChauR* 7 (1972): 37-43.
20. This is also implied by Alfred David, "The Hero of the *Troilus*," *Speculum* 37 (1962): 566-81.
21. Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Significance of Chaucer's Revisions of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *MP* 55 (1957-58): 5.
22. On the relationship between *Troilus* and Pandarus, see Alan T. Gaylord, "Friendship in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *ChauR* 3 (1969): 239-64; and Leah R. Freiwald, "Swych Love of Frenedes: Pandarus and *Troilus*," *ChauR* 6 (1971): 120-29.
23. For extensive analyses of how the form of *Troilus* manifests this tension through paradox and ambiguity, see Muscatine, *French Tradition*, pp. 124-65; Ida L. Gordon, *The Double Sorrow of Troilus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), passim; Patricia M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 2:112-78; Donald W. Rowe, *O Love O Charite! Contraries Harmonized in Chaucer's Troilus* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), passim.
24. On Chaucer's revisions of *Troilus*, see Robert Kilburn Root, *The Textual Tradition of Chaucer's Troilus*, Chaucer Society, 1st ser., 99 (1916; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprints, 1967); and *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1926), pp. xii-xiii, lxx-lxxi. More recently, see Owen, "Revisions," pp. 1-5.
25. Bloomfield, "Distance," p. 206, describes the several ways in which Chaucer emphasizes "the struggle of the artist-narrator against the brutality of the facts to which he cannot give a good turn. As a faithful historian, he cannot evade the rigidity of decisive events—the given."
26. Cf. James I. Wimsatt, "Medieval and Modern in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," *PMLA* 92 (1977): 203-16, which seeks to demonstrate that the concrete universal works in the poem.
27. "Chaucerian Tragedy," *ELH* 19 (1952): 1-37; Monica E. MacAlpine, *The Genre of Troilus and Criseyde* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), which reached me after I had written this chapter, interestingly supplies some needed corrections to Robertson's Boethian argument.

28. On Chaucer's use of this imagery, see Stephen Barney, "Troilus Bound," *Speculum* 48 (1972): 445-58.

29. Among the many essays on the philosophical implications of *Troilus*, see especially Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (1926; revised and enlarged, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), pp. 241-98; Howard R. Patch, "Troilus on Determinism," *Speculum* 6 (1929): 225-43; Theodore A. Stroud, "Boethius' Influence on Chaucer's *Troilus*," *MP* 45 (1951-52): 1-9; John P. McCall, "Five Book Structure in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *MLQ* 23 (1962): 297-308; Donald R. Howard, *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 79-160.

30. Cf. Joseph E. Gallagher, "Theology and Intention in Chaucer's *Troilus*," *ChauR* 7 (1972): 44-66.

31. Few critics of *Troilus* have been able to avoid discussing the unsettling effects on the poem's form of its ending. For specific discussions of the problem, but with varying conclusions, see Curry, *Medieval Sciences*, pp. 294-98; E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Ending of Chaucer's *Troilus*," in *Early English and Norse Studies Presented to Hugh Smith*, ed. Arthur Brown and Peter Foote (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. 26-45, rpt. in *Speaking*, pp. 84-101; Peter Dronke, "The Conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*," *MAE* 33 (1964): 47-52; Anthony E. Farnham, "Chaucerian Irony and the ending of the *Troilus*," *ChauR* 1 (1967): 207-16; Muscatine, *French Tradition*, pp. 161-65; John M. Steadman, *Disembodied Laughter: Troilus and the Apotheosis Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), esp. pp. 112-67; David, *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 27-36. See also Alice R. Kaminsky, *Chaucer's Troilus & Criseyde and the Critics* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980).

32. "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*," in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 17 (1932): pp. 56-75.

### Chapter Five

1. The curious position the *Legend of Good Women* holds in criticism of Chaucer's development as a narrative artist may be exemplified by the fact that Muscatine's significant book on the development of style and meaning throughout Chaucer's career does not at all deal with the poem but moves rather from *Troilus* to the *Canterbury Tales*. It may also be exemplified by the strikingly honest opening sentence of the preface to Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. vii: "This book is designed to fill a gap in Chaucerian Studies, though I might wish it had been done long since by another hand."

2. Increasingly, Chaucer critics are recognizing that the *Legend of Good Women*, especially its prologues, represents a significant, even crucial, turning point in Chaucer's poetic career. See Frank, *Legend*, pp. 1-10; Payne, "Making His Own Myth," *ChauR* 9 (1975): 197-211; David, *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 36-51. Payne has always been one of the poem's great partisans and supporters: see *Key of Remembrance*, esp. pp. 91-112.

3. See, for example, Frank, *Legend*, pp. 52 and 88 ff.; see also Fyler, *Ovid and Chaucer*, p. 99.

4. John Gower, *Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 235. No one, however, knows what the nature of the command was, or if the command included a prescription for form, as it seems to have included a prescription for theme.

The accusations against the poet in the prologue suggest that the actions and nature of the heroine in *Troilus* may have created a stir to which the poet responded by writing this piece.

5. Frank, *Legend*, pp. 176-79.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-210.

7. If the *Monk's Tale* were indeed written earlier in Chaucer's career than the "Canterbury" period, its form could be the prototype even for the storied portion of the *Legend of Good Women*.

8. The prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* has come down to us in two versions. The F-version has most manuscript support and is assumed to be the earlier; the G-version exists in only one manuscript (Cambridge University Gg. 4.27) and is assumed to be later. Bertrand H. Bronson, *In Search of Chaucer* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 52, says that "the differences between the two prologues are so important that distinct poems are the result." He mentions that in the F-version, the poet "appears to display a continuous and intense personal involvement. In G, on the contrary, the tone of everything that is revised or now first introduced is invariably soberer, more detached, more suited to advancing years." Although it is fascinating to consider the two versions separately and to examine ways in which Chaucer changed his prologue for the better or for the worse, the differences between the two versions, despite Bronson's assertion about the importance of changes from one to the other, have little relevance for my argument. I shall therefore discuss the prologue as if it were one prologue, indicating which version after quotations.

9. *Key of Remembrance*, pp. 103-4.

10. Based presumably on the assumption that Chaucer felt the persona's penance to be unjustly imposed, it has been argued that most of the legends are not really about good women but about bad ones, which makes the poem a kind of oblique satire. See H. C. Goddard, *Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*, *JEGP* 7 (1908): 87-129, and 8 (1909): 47-111; and Robert M. Lumiansky, "Chaucer and the Idea of Unfaithful Men," *MLN* 62 (1947): 560-62. Cf. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, pp. 96-123.

11. Howard, *Idea*, esp. pp. 159-88.

12. "The Literary Form of the Prologue," p. 174.

13. *Idea*, esp. pp. 1-20 and 25-28, argues that the idea of *Canterbury Tales* is complete, although the work actually exists in fragments. My own argument does not seek to contradict Howard's thesis; rather, it wishes to alter the terms.

14. Cf. James Dean, "The Ending of the *Canterbury Tales*, 1952-1976," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 21 (1979): 17-33.

15. Cf. Howard, *Idea*, p. 53: "It is in the nature of amorality to be inconclusive, as it is in the nature of 'concluded' works to have, or seem to have, a moral or a 'theme'."

16. David, *Strumpet Muse*, p. 91.

17. Portions of the following discussion have appeared in my "Catalogue Form and Catalogue Style in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studia Neophilologica* 52 (1980): 35-46.

18. These texts have been conveniently printed and discussed in Edmond Faral, *Les Art poétiques du XII<sup>e</sup> et du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Recherches et documents sur la technique littéraire du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1962). See also James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 135-93.

19. Alice M. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1965), pp. 23-88.

20. Guillaume de Lorris et Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, 2 vols., ed. Felix Lecoy, *Les Classiques Français du Moyen Age* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1965-66), II. 525-36; translation mine.

21. See E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Idiom of Popular Poetry in the *Miller's Tale*," *English Institute Essays*, 1950, ed. A. S. Downer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp. 116-40; rpt. *Speaking*, pp. 13-29.

22. *Works*, p. 834, note to l. 813.

23. See Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the "General Prologue" to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

24. Robert P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner, the Scriptural Eunuch, and the *Pardoner's Tale*," *Speculum* 30 (1955): 180-99; however, cf. Monica E. MacAlpine, "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How It Matters," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 8-22.

25. *Preface*, p. 320.

26. There have been many excellent analyses of the Prioress's portrait. See especially Robert W. Hanning, "From *Eva* to *Ave* to Eglington and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play," *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2 (1977): 580-99, esp. 585-91; Florence H. Ridley, *The Prioress and the Critics*, University of California Publications, English Studies, No. 30 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 16-21; E. Talbot Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), pp. 883-85, and "The Masculine Narrator and Four Women of Style," in *Speaking*, pp. 59-64.

27. On the distinction between the Pilgrim and the Poet, Donaldson's essay "Chaucer the Pilgrim," *PMLA* 69 (1954), has become the *locus classicus*.

28. On the relationship of the Monk to the chivalric world, see Robert E. Kaske, "The Knight's Interruption of the *Monk's Tale*," *ELH* 24 (1957): 249-68.

29. "The *Canterbury Tales*: Style of the Man and Style of the Work," in Brewer, *Chaucerians*, p. 95.

30. Helge Kökeritz, "Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer," *PMLA* 69 (1954): 937-52; Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956): 225-46, and "Chaucer's Puns: A Supplementary List," *PMLA* 73 (1958): 167-70; Norman D. Hinton, "More Puns in Chaucer," *AN&Q* 2 (1964): 115-16.

### Chapter Six

1. The complicated thematic nature of *Canterbury Tales* has been perhaps the most extensively discussed issue in Chaucer criticism. Recently it has been most comprehensively discussed by Paul Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), passim; Bernard F. Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1962), passim; Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), passim; Howard, *Idea*, pp. 227-306; David, *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 77-240; Traugott Lawler, *The One and the Many in the Canterbury Tales* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1980), passim; Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1981), passim.

2. See Margaret Schlauch, "The Man of Law's Tale," in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (1941; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 155-88.



3. Rodney Delasanta, "And of Great Reverence: Chaucer's Man of Law," *ChauR* 5 (1971): 288-310. Of course, in the case of the *Man of Law's Tale*, the question of values is further complicated by the Man of Law's claim that he is remembering a tale he heard originally from merchants.

4. Although the critical assumption about a dramatic principle in the *Canterbury Tales* goes back at least as far as Kittredge's *Chaucer and His Poetry*, it is most fully and most complexly worked out in R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sundry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955).

5. For a notable exception about the Wife of Bath, see Kemp Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1951), pp. 215-18.

6. Consider also the implications for the meanings of their tales of the Man of Law's attitude toward women and the Merchant's sense of his own potency.

7. Cf. D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Some Disputed Chaucerian Terminology," *Speculum* 52 (1977): 571-81.

8. Cf. Robert A. Pratt, "The Development of the Wife of Bath," in *Studies in Medieval Literature*, ed. MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), pp. 45-79.

9. The peculiar reference by Justinus in the *Merchant's Tale* to the Wife of Bath, who exists in the outer form, is different in nature. It is similar to the Clerk's response in the outer form to the Wife of Bath, although its occurrence in the inner form makes it seem disruptive of the fictional levels in a way that most charitably can be called mysterious.

10. On the order of the fragments, see especially the remarks in *Works*, p. 649; see also Charles A. Owen, Jr., "The Development of the *Canterbury Tales*," *JEGP* 57 (1958): 449-76, and "The Earliest Plan of the *Canterbury Tales*," *MS* 21 (1959): 202-10; Robert A. Pratt, "The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 66 (1951): 1141-67; Edward S. Cohen, "The Sequence of the *Canterbury Tales*," *ChauR* 9 (1974): 190-95; Larry D. Benson, "The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 77-120.

11. See Explanatory and Textual Notes in *Works*, pp. 696-97, 891.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 697.

13. Cf. Alfred David, "The Man of Law vs. Chaucer: A Case in Chaucerian Poetics," *PMLA* 82 (1967): 217-25; rpt. and expanded in *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 118-34.

14. It is interesting to speculate that the *Cook's Tale* of Perkyn Revelour, having adultery in common with the *Manciple's Tale*, also might have concerned the theme of what it means to talk too much, and hence would have represented a tale in a constraive form but with a similar set of themes; see Lumiansky, *Sundry Folk*, p. 237. However, cf. Britton J. Harwood, "Language and the Real: Chaucer's Manciple," *ChauR* 6 (1973): 268-79.

15. Ralph Baldwin, *The Unity of the Canterbury Tales*, *Anglistica*, ed. Thorsten Dahl, Kemp Malone, and Geoffrey Tillotson, Vol. 5 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1955).

16. See particularly Richard Neuse, "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy," *UTQ* 31 (1961-62): 299-315; W. C. Stokoe, "Structure and Intention in the First Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*," *UTQ* 31 (1961-62): 120-27.

17. Alan T. Gaylord, "Sentence and Solas in Fragment VII of the *Canterbury Tales*: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor," *PMLA* 82 (1967): 226-35.

18. Muscatine, *French Tradition*, pp. 216-17; Bruce A. Rosenberg, "The Contrary Tales of the Second Nun and the Canon's Yeoman," *ChauR* 2 (1968): 278-91.

19. Peter G. Beidler, "The Pairing of the *Franklin's Tale* and the *Physician's Tale*," *ChauR* 3 (1969): 275-79.

20. See especially George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," *MP* 9 (1912): 435-67; Harry Barrett Hinckley, "The Debate on Marriage in the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA* 32 (1917): 292-305; Clifford P. Lyons, "The Marriage Debate in the *Canterbury Tales*," *ELH* 2 (1935): 252-62; Daniel S. Silvia, "Geoffrey Chaucer on the Subject of Men, Women, Marriage, and *Gentillesse*," *RLV* 33 (1967): 227-36; R. E. Kaske, "Chaucer's Marriage Group," in *Love Poet*, pp. 45-65; Ruth Berggren, "Who Really Is the Advocate of Equality in The Marriage Group?", *Massachusetts Studies in English*, no. 6 (1977), pp. 25-36.

21. Howard, *Idea*, pp. 339-76. A series of important critical essays on the *Pardoner's Tale* have been collected in Dewey R. Faulkner, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Pardoner's Tale* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973); of these, see especially Janet Adelman, "That We May Leere Som Wit," pp. 96-106, and Stephen A. Barney, "An Evaluation of the Pardoner's Tale," pp. 83-95.

22. For an interesting examination of the way Chaucer adapted the source of the *Physician's Tale* to the character of the physician, see Anne L. Middleton, "The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyr's: 'Ensamles Mo than Ten' as a Method in the *Canterbury Tales*," *ChauR* 8 (1973): 9-32.

23. On the relationship of the Squire's artistry and the fragmentary state of his tale, see Charles F. Duncan, Jr., "'Straw for youre gentilles': The Gentle Franklin's Interruption of the Squire," *ChauR* 5 (1970): 161-64; cf. the response to Duncan by John W. Clark, "Does the Franklin Interrupt the Squire," *ChauR* 7 (1972): 160-61. On the state of completion of the tale, see also Joyce E. Peterson, "The Finished Fragment: A Reassessment of the *Squire's Tale*," *ChauR* 5 (1970): 62-74.

24. *Bibliographical Manual*, p. 356.

25. See Penn R. Szittyá, "The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady: The Friar's Parody of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *PMLA* 90 (1975): 386-94. Also cf. Carole K. Brown, Marion F. Egge, and Penn R. Szittyá, "The *Friar's Tale* and the *Wife of Bath's Tale*," *PMLA* 91 (1976): 291-93.

26. One is tempted to speculate that even the small portion of the *Cook's Tale*, which must be considered a part of the pattern of fragment one, may be inherently designed, though never realized, in the later fragment. The words of the Pardoner to the Wife of Bath (3. 163-68) may represent an early intention on Chaucer's part to follow the *Summoner's Tale* with a third "low" tale by the Pardoner, whose appearance in this fragment is otherwise structurally meaningless.

27. However, cf. Szittyá, "The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady," pp., 391-92.

28. It could also be the case that an examination of the *Shipman's Tale*, believed to have been originally told by the Wife of Bath, may yield a more closely connected thematic purpose, for there the comic effect rests on a promise to repay as it does in both the Friar's and the Summoner's tales.

29. The assertion that Chaucer continually intended to promote charity over cupidity motivates most arguments in Robertson's *Preface*.

30. Paul G. Ruggiers, "The Form of the *Canterbury Tales: Respite Fines*," *College English* 17 (1956): 439-44.

31. *Works*, p. 11.

32. Gaylord, "Sentence and Solas," pp. 226-27.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

34. Cf. Janette Richardson, "The Facade of Bawdry: Image Patterns in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *ELH* 32 (1965): 303-13.

35. R. J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart," *The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judeo-Christian Studies* 2 (1956): 239-55; rpt. *Chaucer Criticism*, 1:245-58; Ridley, *Prioress and Critics*, passim; Albert B. Friedman, "the Prioress's Tale and Chaucer's Anti-Semitism," *ChauR* 9 (1974): 118-29; David, *Strumpet Muse*, pp. 204-14; however, cf. the admonitions about the nature of audience in Dieter Mehl, "the Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), pp. 173-89.

36. The procedure Chaucer undertakes in *Sir Thopas*, including its purposeful incompleteness, is one of the strongest arguments I know in favor of seeing the *Squire's Tale* as an intentional fragment.

37. I do not want to imply that the *Tale of Melibee* is without value or function both in its own right and as a part of *Canterbury Tales*. It is a perfectly fine treatise on the virtue of prudence and uncommonly rich in its use of themes handled elsewhere in *Canterbury Tales*, especially in the tales of fragment seven, and in those that make up the "Marriage Group." On the meaning and value of the *Melibee*, see especially Margaret Schlauch, "the Art of Chaucer's Prose," in Brewer, *Chaucerians*, pp. 153-56; Paul Strohm, "The Allegory of the *Tale of Melibee*," *ChauR* 2 (1967): 32-42; Howard, *Idea*, pp. 310-16. Cf. Dolores Palomo, "What Chaucer Really Did to *Le Livre de Melibee*," *PQ* 53 (1974): 304-20.

38. Muscatine, *French Tradition*, p. 242; however, cf. D. E. Myers, "Focus and 'Moralitee' in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*," *ChauR* 7 (1972): 210-20.

39. *Works*, p. 754, note to l. 3190; Albert C. Baugh, ed., *Chaucer's Major Poetry* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 377, notes to ll. 4380 and 4384; Robert A. Pratt, ed., *The Tales of Canterbury* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), p. 244, note to l. 3190.

40. On May third Palamon escapes from prison in the *Knight's Tale* (l. 1462), and Pandarus, suffering a "teene of love," takes to his bed in *Troilus* (2. 56); see John P. McCall, "Chaucer's May 3," *MLN* 76 (1961): 201-5.

41. "Food, Laxatives, and Catharsis in Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*," *Speculum* 51 (1976): 49-68.

42. *Idea*, pp. 304 ff.

43. However, cf. Derek Pearsall, "The English Chaucerians," in Brewer, *Chaucerians*, pp. 202-3.



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## VIRTUE OF NECESSITY

### Inconclusiveness and Narrative Form in Chaucer's Poetry

By Larry Sklute

Chaucer left many of his poems unfinished. The *House of Fame* breaks off shortly before its end; the *Legend of Good Women* has two prologues and stops just before the narrator gives us the conclusion to the *Legend of Hypermnestra*. And the *Canterbury Tales* is a work of fragments within which the tales by the Cook, the Squire, the Monk, and the Pilgrim Chaucer are all incomplete.

This incompleteness becomes particularly interesting when one considers that Chaucer's completed narratives fascinate most by their inconclusiveness. The *Book of the Duchess* solves a problem different from the one posed by its beginning. The *Parliament of Fowls* raises several questions about value that it never answers. And *Troilus and Criseyde* insists on answers that many students of medieval literature agree the body of the work neither asks nor requires. The *Canterbury Tales*, in its fragmentary structure, its alternating points of view, and its way of presenting debate without closing it, simply refuses to be conclusive.

In his examination of these frequently noted characteristics, Larry Sklute suggests some historical reasons for Chaucer's inconclusiveness and considers how it both creates and affects meaning in his narrative forms. Dr. Sklute reads each work as Chaucer's attempt to represent such antinomies as experience and authority, belief and proof, freedom and necessity, truth and opinion. He finds the inconclusiveness of Chaucer's poems an indication that their author was not always satisfied with how well the narrative forms he had inherited embodied human experience; and he sees the shape of Chaucer's literary career as a search for an appropriate form able to accommodate the inconclusiveness these antinomies create. The inconclusiveness that prevails throughout Chaucer's literary career leads him to discover in the *Canterbury Tales* a kind of narrative unique in the Middle Ages—a form that provided an early model for modern fiction.